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THE HOUSE OF WINDOWS

The House of Windows

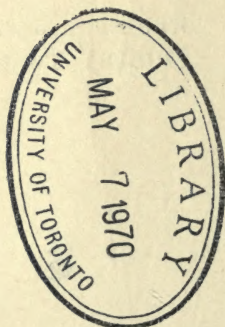
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THE HOUSE OF WINDOWS

CHAPTER I

THE DEPARTMENTAL BABY

IN the bustling Stores of Angers and Son, the ribbon counter, so lately the storm centre of a throng of struggling shoppers, was slowly resuming its normal aspect. The shimmering piles of ribbons, which had collapsed under the onslaught of frenzied women, were being deftly rebuilt by the weary clerks. Order was emerging out of chaos, and something like neatness reigned once more in the glass cases and on the open shelves. In a word, the Bargain Sale was over, for the day.

It had not been an ordinary one-day-a-week Bargain Sale—far from it. The clerks, standing knee-deep in paper from the unwound bolts of ribbon, were proof enough of its exceptional nature.

GREAT SEMI-ANNUAL SALE
SACRIFICE OF ALL RIBBONS WITHOUT RESERVE
EVERYTHING SLAUGHTERED!
9 TO 5 DAILY.

This had been the announcement on the handbills, and apparently the demand for slaughtered ribbons had been bloodthirsty, for now the clerks were straightening up, knee-deep, so to speak, in corpses of the slain.

“My! But I’m tired! Say, don’t some of them

give you a pain?" asked Miss Eden, winding baby ribbon.

"Who?" Miss Twiss paused in her building of pyramids to stifle a yawn.

"Those bargain women! Their eyes—horrid!"

"Gracious! I have no time to watch their eyes. It takes me all my time to watch their hands. Did you see the gay one in green try to sneak a bolt out of the fifty-cent division? Pretty nearly did it, too.—Oh, Miss Brown, while you are up on that step would you mind handing me down that top box?"

Miss Brown obligingly handed down the box.

"All their eyes look alike," went on Miss Eden. "Greedy, I should say! They make me sick."

Miss Twiss yawned again. "I've enough to make me sick without bothering about eyes," she began, then, as a belated but impatient customer tapped sharply upon the glass, "No, madam, I am sorry. The ribbon sale was from nine till five. This ribbon is now seventy-five cents a yard. My! didn't she look mad," she added as the disappointed one moved away.

The other clerks giggled. They were tired, some of them to the verge of exhaustion, but they were so used to the sensation that it left their general interest in life quite unimpaired. Miss Brown, who was a new girl, looked blue about the lips and once she said, "Oh, if I could only sit down!" emphasising the *down* despairingly.

"Well, you can't," said Miss Twiss. "And don't slouch your shoulders. Straighten up! Here comes Slippers."

Slippers, otherwise Mr. Harcourt Flynn, the floor-walker, had the reputation of not standing any nonsense. He considered slouched shoulders nonsense;

girls behind a ribbon counter should be straight and alert. Therefore, as he passed, all the girls' shoulders miraculously straightened and they became very alert indeed.

"And yet he isn't a bad sort, really," whispered Miss Twiss reflectively. "He acts like that for the same reason that he waxes his moustache—thinks he needs it in his business."

"Miss Twiss!"

Miss Twiss jumped, for she had not noticed that Mr. Flynn had paused beside her, and his voice was stern, unmistakably the voice of one who has discovered some nonsense and will not tolerate it. "Miss Twiss, why is this baby carriage here?"

Miss Twiss leaned over the wide counter.

"Why, it's a go-cart!" she said stupidly.

"Why is this—er—go-cart here?"

"I didn't know that it was there, Mr. Flynn. It is so small that I did not see it. What a tiny one!"

"Its size," said Mr. Flynn, "is not important. Why is it here? I think this is your department, Miss Twiss?"

Miss Twiss flushed. "Did any of you girls see a lady leave this go-cart?" she demanded of her subordinates.

Three of the girls shook their heads with decision, but Miss Brown, the new girl, seemed to hesitate.

"Do you know anything about this, Miss Brown?"

"Yes, I saw the woman leave it," she admitted, adding timidly, "I did not know that it was not permitted."

The floor-walker frowned. There had certainly been some nonsense here! He pulled one end of his waxed moustache severely.

"I *think* this is your department, Miss Twiss," he continued with elaborate sarcasm. "Miss Brown is new, I believe, but apparently she has not been instructed in her duties. This go-cart——"

The go-cart, finding itself the centre of interest, seemed suddenly to wake up. A feeble wail issued from it. Mr. Flynn stepped back so hastily that the girls tittered. This was *lèse-majesté*, and the manner of the floor-walker became more awe-inspiring than ever. He consulted his watch.

"It is now," he remarked, "just five minutes from closing time. Miss Twiss, you might ask Miss Brown at what time this go-cart was left here."

"At two o'clock," answered the new girl, speaking for herself. "I noticed a woman leave it, but then the rush began and I forgot about it. It is screened, as you see, between the two counters. I naturally supposed that she had taken it away again."

Mr. Flynn glanced once more at his watch. "What Miss Brown supposes is not material, Miss Twiss. I need hardly point out that it was your duty to have informed her of the rules. Young ladies, it is not necessary for me to tell you what the presence of this go-cart means?" His tone was frigidly polite, but they all felt that someone had been guilty of nonsense, and that he wasn't going to stand it. The girls looked at each other and ceased to titter.

"It means desertion, I suppose," said Miss Twiss. She knew in her heart that it meant also dismissal for her, or at least the losing of her place as head of the ribbon counter.

"Exactly; you will at once report the matter at the office."

Mr. Flynn replaced his watch. Miss Twiss bowed.

She knew what reporting at the office meant, but she had her pride and would have gone without a word had not Miss Brown interposed with an excited question.

"What will they do? Where will they take it?" she asked of the floor-walker. The majesty of Mr. Flynn was surprised at the question, but he answered as befitted his dignity:

"Don't know, I'm sure. That's hardly in my department."

"They'll take it to the police station, of course," volunteered Miss Eden.

"To the police station—that little mite of a baby? Oh," with a sudden impulse, "I don't think they need do that! I will—I mean, I think I know who left the baby. She didn't intend to desert it. She—I'll take it home to her myself."

Mr. Flynn was surprised. He was also suspicious, but above all he was desirous of having things go smoothly in his department, and this seemed an easy way out of an awkward situation. He looked for a moment at Miss Brown's flushed cheeks—her lips were not blue now—and shrugged his shoulders. Then, as the clang of the closing bell rang through the store, he gave his verdict.

"Very well, Miss Twiss, as Miss Brown is willing to take the responsibility of returning this—er—go-cart, you need not report the matter at the office. See that it does not occur again."

He moved away, and the girls, in a sudden flutter, began hastily to spread their dust cloths over the reconstructed pyramids. They looked at Miss Brown out of the corners of their eyes. Had she not been a new girl they would have descended upon her in an avalanche of questioning, but ribbon counters have

their etiquette, and the young ladies felt that they did not know Miss Brown well enough to question her. They felt quite at liberty to show their disapproval of the mystery, however, by a certain aloofness of manner shown in the flirt with which they spread their dust cloths and extricated their skirts from the entangling corpses of the slaughter sale. Miss Brown, still rosy with suppressed excitement, volunteered no information. She spread her dust cloths rapidly and hurried away to put on her coat and hat.

When she had gone the girls gathered around the tiny go-cart, and a chorus of exclamations broke forth.

"Oh, what a *little* one!"

"It must be starved!"

"Whatever did Brownny tell that lie for?"

"What do you suppose she is going to do with it?"

"You don't suppose she really knew——"

"Hush! Here she is."

Miss Brown came hurriedly up and, for the first time, peeped under the little black cover of the go-cart. She appeared to do something for the comfort of its inmate, for the tiny thread of wailing ceased. When she looked up there were tears in her nice blue eyes.

"Girls," she said as if upon impulse, "I may as well tell you, I don't know a thing about the woman. I saw her when she wheeled the go-cart up and—I'll never forget her face. It was such an ugly face. It was like—well, it was just ugly. She looked poor and half starved. Of course, she meant to leave the baby! Look at its eyes—it has been drugged! But I just couldn't let it go to the police station. I'm going to take it home—with me."

The girls, all friendly now, gathered closer.

"Oh, say!"

"How spunky of you!"

"Well, I declare!"

"But," said Miss Twiss. "Can you——"

"Yes, I can, somehow. You know my sister is always at home. She is blind and very lonely. This will be just what she needs. Of course, I would be afraid to risk it if I had only what I can earn, but we have a little. We get along quite nicely." She laid her hand in its cotton glove resolutely upon the handle of the go-cart.

Little Miss Eden pushed herself to the front of the group.

"Oh, Browny," she said, "I think you're great! And, say, can't we all help? May we call and see it? Why can't we have a departmental baby? Say——"

"Hush!" interrupted Miss Twiss. "You'll give it away if you talk so loud! Look, here comes Slippers!"

CHAPTER II

THE INVISIBLE LINK

AT the time of the ribbon sale, made memorable by the finding of the baby, the great Departmental Stores of Angers and Son occupied one solid block of the best business property in the city. Three sides of the block were lined with plate-glass windows, displaying everything from a saucepan to a Paris gown; the fourth side was lined with delivery autos, each bearing the simple legend "Angers and Son." The same name was carved in the stone over the main entrances and stamped upon every bit of paper and every bag or box in the great stores, and yet, as a matter of fact, Angers did not exist, neither was there any such person as Angers' son.

Once there had been both Angers and his son, and they had owned the Stores and piled up the wealth it made for them. But it is just the old commentary upon life that the store should be there, a firm and strong reality, while both Angers and his son were memories. All that remained of them was their name, and that remained because it was an asset. No one knew just who stood behind the name of Angers and Son—that is to say, the people who were most concerned did not know. The clerks in the store did not know, the floor-walkers, the managers of departments, the buyers, the superintendents, did not know. To them all there was

no one higher up than Mr. Davies, the general manager. If Mr. Davies knew he did not tell. He always spoke of the "higher up" as "the Board"; from which everyone guessed that Angers and Son was really a syndicate: and guessed wrongly.

There is no reason why the reader should not be taken into the secret, however; the truth was that Mr. Adam Torrance held Angers and Son in the hollow of his hand. Mr. Adam Torrance had been a rich man before he had bought out the Stores from the trustees of the Angers estate; he was now a very rich man, even in a city of rich men, and was daily becoming richer. He was young, too, to be so rich, only twenty-nine—almost a boy! If the Stores had known about him they would have been delighted. It is certainly more pleasant to be owned by a young and fine-looking proprietor, than by a Mr. Davies who is middle-aged and ugly, and a Board which is simply nothing at all. In the old days there was a legend that Angers and Son had sometimes inspected the Stores personally; had known the heads of departments by name and been personally acquainted with the superintendents, but no one really remembered whether these things were so. Certainly Mr. Davies knew everyone and everything and his eyes were everywhere, but Mr. Davies was simply an employee, at the head of other employees; and as for the "Board," it seemed to have neither eyes nor ears nor any real existence. One could not, for instance, see it driving a four-in-hand or speeding a motor-car, and say, "See, there goes the boss!" or point to its palatial residence and remark carelessly, "The old man does things in style, eh?" But these and many similar pleasures the Stores might have had if they had only known about Mr. Adam Torrance.

The Torrance residence, alone, would have furnished a mine of inexhaustible interest for the Stores if a justifiable personal connection could have been established. The feudal spirit is alive in many of us yet, and, although we would feel it mean-spirited to acknowledge it, the man to whom we give our service is not quite as other men. He must always be a little more or a little less. After all, there are only a few hundred years between the peasant gazing upon the castle of his overlord with feelings of loyalty or envy, according to his nature, and the clerk passing by the modern palace of his employer and eyeing it with the selfsame feelings begotten by the selfsame nature. "What wonderful changes the years make," we often say, but once in a while we wake up to the realisation that years do not make so very much difference after all!

Fortunately or unfortunately, all of these natural interests in an employer's affairs and worldly state were denied the clerks of Angers and Son. They read daily in the papers of the things which Mr. Adam Torrance—and particularly Mrs. Adam Torrance—did and left undone, but they did not gasp or thrill or care a penny about it, because the link which united all their little interests to the big interests of the Torrance family was invisible. So that, when, just a week before the ribbon bargain sale, a terrible blow fell upon Adam Torrance and his wife in the kidnapping of their six months' old baby, Elice, the case as reported by the papers was read and forgotten by the Stores in an hour. There are so many sensations in the papers nowadays. Of course, if the Stores had known that the lost baby belonged to the Stores things would have been different. In that case the Stores would have hummed and thrilled with interest and sympathy, every clerk worth his salt would

have turned immediately into an amateur detective, and it is just possible that—but there is nothing more futile than discussing things that are just possible!

As a matter of fact, Adam Torrance and his poor little wife did not think of the Stores at all when the agony of their great loss came upon them. They thought of nothing day or night except Elice, little baby Elice, who had just begun to be troubled by a first tooth. The circumstances of the kidnapping were, according to the newspapers, “shrouded in impenetrable mystery.” They, the papers, decided that the crime was “another of those base and cruel reprisals of the poor upon the rich which defy our methods of detection and remain a blot upon the fair name of our country.” Apparently it was not a case of capture for ransom. Eagerly the frantic parents waited for some word from the kidnappers, and as the suspense grew more terrible Adam Torrance let it be publicly known that he would pay. In spite of the fact that he was bound to a league of millionaires who had sworn—for the better protection of their children—that no ransoms would be paid to kidnappers, he let it be known that he would pay: nor indeed did those others seek to dissuade him. Human nature, touched in a vulnerable place, is apt to make light of contracts. In a week, to be exact, upon the day after the bargain sale, Mr. Torrance capitulated entirely. He sent a notice to the papers begging for news of his lost daughter and offering to pay anything in any way the kidnappers might demand.

“Make it as broad and as strong as possible,” the white-faced young father told the silent reporters. “I’ll do anything to get the baby back. I think my wife is dying. The baby will certainly die if it is not getting good care—what can those dastardly villains know

about a baby ! The police tell me to wait—wait. I'll not wait—the child may die while I'm waiting. Tell them to bring her back and I'll give them anything ! ”

More than one of the reporters turned away and fumbled with the leaves of his notebook so that he might not see the agony on the poor fellow's face, and when they were in the street again they exploded into lurid comments upon the cowardly miscreants who had caused such misery.

The Stores read all about it in the evening papers and also made comments, warm but more detached, and wanted to know what our boasted civilisation is coming to, anyway, if a man's own children aren't safe in their own nurse's arms.

“It seems to me to be a pretty lame story put up by that nurse,” remarked Mr. Harcourt Flynn (otherwise Slippers), as he washed his nice white hands preparatory to sitting down to dinner in his “apartments.”

“Yes,” said Miss Flynn, who kept house and did not feel it necessary to be always burdened with the “Harcourt.” “Yes, it's lame, but if she had known more about it she would probably have had a better story.”

“Hum ! perhaps.”

“So the papers say, anyway. She was very trustworthy. Mrs. Torrance got her out from England specially. They say she wept and wrung her hands, and said that she had nursed babies for twenty-five years and such a thing had never happened before.”

“Well, she'll have some fun getting another baby to nurse,” said Mr. Flynn grimly. “She left that child longer than she admits, depend on it. What puzzles me is why they don't come out after their money. Says he's willing to pay, doesn't he ? ”

"Rather."

"It's queer," continued Mr. Flynn, "that there should be such a fuss about some babies when there're so many lying around that no one has any use for. In a big store like Angers' one sees things."

"What things?" asked his sister curiously.

"Oh, things. Human nature, you know. Some women that come in seem just to hate their children the way they slap them around."

"Oh, I guess they don't mean it."

"Don't they? Well, there was a case of desertion yesterday at the ribbon counter."

Miss Flynn glanced quickly at the paper.

"Oh, it didn't get in the paper. Trust your uncle for that!" Mr. Flynn smiled easily. "It wouldn't do me any good to have that kind of thing happen in my department. 'Gainst the rules (he pronounced it 'rulls'), you know. So I was glad enough when one of the girls said that she knew the woman who left it and offered to take it home."

"But if the baby was really deserted, how could the girl have known the mother?"

"I thought of that myself," admitted Mr. Flynn reflectively, "but she said she recognised her, and she ought to know. It isn't necessary to go behind that."

"Well, it seemed very queer."

"Lots of things are queer. Did you say dinner was ready, Amelia?"

"How big was it?" asked Miss Flynn abruptly.

"How big was what?"

"The baby, of course."

"How in the world should I know how big it was?"

Miss Flynn sighed. "Poor mite!" she said. "But

if the young girl knew the mother perhaps it wasn't deserted after all."

"*Perhaps* it wasn't!" Mr. Flynn's tone held many meanings. It was the tone of one who knows human nature to the core, and weeps for it.

"Was it a boy or a girl?"

"Really, Amelia, what do you think I am?"

"Just a man, I suppose!" said Miss Flynn crossly. "You are thinking now twice as much about your dinner as you are about that poor deserted child."

"If you would do the same, my dear, the potatoes might not be quite stone cold!"

Miss Flynn lifted the covers from the tureens. "If I did not know better, Sam," said she, "I would think that you were absolutely the most heartless——"

CHAPTER III

1620 BROOK STREET

MR. THOMAS ALEXANDER BURNS had already walked up and down Brook Street thrice, and was walking down for the fourth time, when, about the middle of a block, he almost ran over Miss Eden, walking up.

"Well, I declare, it's Mr. Burns," said Miss Eden, using the pleasant formula which always implies that one might possibly be someone else.

Mr. Burns, thus convinced of his own identity, lifted his hat, and, for no apparent reason, blushed.

"I am trying to find a number," went on Miss Eden, drawing a slip of paper from her purse. "It is number 1620 Brook Street; Miss Brown's lodgings, you know. This is Brook Street, isn't it? I don't suppose you can tell me where she lives?"

"Oh, it ought to be quite easy to find the number," evaded the astute Mr. Burns. "It is not quite dark yet. Wonderful how these autumn evenings linger." He cleared his throat. "Number 1620, you say? It ought to be somewhere hereabouts, a few doors farther east, I fancy." All this with such a fine air of detachment that one must have been sharp indeed to have guessed that he had already passed number 1620 six times (three times up and three times down), and knew to a yard exactly how far they were from it at that present moment.

"I am going to call to see the baby, you know," said Miss Eden confidentially. "Of course, as you are a friend of Miss Brown's, you have heard about the baby? Most of the girls have called already, but this is my first free evening; not that one can help much, but it is a friendly thing to do."

"Most kind, I am sure," agreed Mr. Burns, and then as if upon sudden impulse, "I wonder, now, if it would be the friendly thing for me to call too?"

Miss Eden, who was really a rather stupid girl, looked surprised, but murmured that she was sure that Mr. Burns' call would be appreciated.

"Seeing that I am so close," added Mr. Burns.

"Why, yes."

"And as I happen to be going in that direction in any case?"

"I am sure it would be very nice," said Miss Eden. She had had the impression that Mr. Burns had been going in exactly the opposite direction when he had met her, but that was his business; nevertheless, it seemed to her, not knowing Mr. Burns' peculiar state of mind, that he was making a lot of fuss about a very little thing.

It was quite dusk when they reached the house which they sought. So dark that the facility with which Mr. Burns deciphered the number was little short of miraculous. Miss Eden, who had good eyes also, could not see it at all.

"But I am sure it is the right house," she told him. "See all the windows. It is a regular house of windows! I recognised it from the description Miss Twiss gave me. Do you know Miss Twiss, the tall, dark girl with the big mouth? You'd like her! I'll introduce you sometime. Say, isn't this a funny house?"

"Does Miss Twiss know Miss Brown well?"

"Not what you would call well. You see, Miss Brown is new. But she called to see how the baby was getting on. That's how she knew about the house. We can't see very well now, it is so dark, but Miss Twiss thinks Miss Brown is lucky to live in such rooms. It used to be quite a swell place when this part of the city was fashionable. Then it was a girls' school, until all the land around it was built upon. That accounts for the number of windows."

"By Jove, it looks as if it were nearly all windows!" exclaimed Mr. Burns.

"Yes, bay-windows. The idea was to give the schoolgirls lots of light, I suppose. Miss Brown told Miss Twiss that they make it very cold in winter, and ordinary curtains never look right, they are so high—hist! someone's coming!"

The door before them opened with a jerk, disclosing a bare-looking hall, and a forbidding-looking personage with a large nose.

"Who do you want?" asked the personage abruptly.

"Do the Misses Brown live here?" asked Miss Eden politely.

"Third floor back, on the left. You don't need to ring at this door. This hall's for everybody. The names are pasted on the wall." She pointed to a framed cardboard which was covered with names, to which certain directions were attached.

The callers, however, did not wait to fathom its mysteries. Third-floor-back-to-the-left was sufficiently explicit, and they found their way easily to a door which bore upon a neat white card, "The Misses Brown."

At their knock there was a slight commotion behind the door, a laugh, and the noise of something being

hurriedly pushed away. Then the door opened a trifle and Miss Brown's face appeared.

"Oh, Miss Eden, come in! We are just——. Oh, Mr. Burns, I didn't—excuse me a moment."

In a sudden panic she partly closed the door again, and more sounds of confusion added to the red upon Mr. Burns' already embarrassed countenance. It was only a moment, however, and then the door was thrown hospitably open.

"Do come in!" said Miss Brown. "It was the baby's bath that was in the way. We had it on two chairs, and one of the chairs was against the door, and it *nearly* tipped. You needn't be afraid to sit on the chairs; they are quite dry."

"We thought," began Mr. Burns, "that we would call in to see how the baby was."

"I just couldn't sleep for thinking of that baby," declared Miss Eden. "I think it is the most *romantic* thing! But Mr. Burns needn't pretend that he was thinking about it, he just happened to meet me in the street, and I reminded him."

Mr. Burns was gallantly understood to murmur, "Not at all." (Luckily the windows of the Misses Brown did not look out directly upon Brook Street.)

Celia Brown smiled brightly at her visitors. Here in her own room she seemed very different from the pale, quiet-looking girl of the ribbon counter at Angers'. True, even there she had a certain attraction, else why the effect already produced upon the susceptible nature of Mr. Burns? But here one noticed for the first time that her hair was wavy and soft, her eyes were clear and pleasantly serious, and her lips were no longer pinched and blue-looking. Her expression, too, was different, more alert, humorous, changeful; more human, in fact.

Behind the counter she had a certain tired and anxious prettiness, and looked, perhaps, twenty-five, if not more. At home her prettiness flowered and blossomed, and one saw that she was certainly not yet twenty. This transformation bewildered while it enchanted Mr. Burns, but Miss Eden took it as a matter of course. She herself sometimes brightened up in the evening if the day had not been too hard.

What did surprise Miss Eden was the wonderful comfort of the little room. Here, at least, the high, narrow casements of the old-fashioned bay-window had been managed successfully, for the curtains, which were of some dainty, figured stuff, had been made to fit, and were surmounted by a graceful valance of the same material. This, and a covered window seat with cushions, took away from the excessive height, and made what in most of the rooms was an eyesore into a pleasant lounging place. There was a round table with a moss green cloth in the centre of the room; the old-fashioned chairs were upholstered in green; a green rug half covered the floor, which was painted to match, and the paper was pretty and quite in keeping. The room which had once been large was now divided by a board partition which did not reach quite to the ceiling. Not an abode of wealth, surely; but to Miss Eden, who knew the rooms of many girl clerks, it displayed a homelike comfort which was surprising. "If only I had a room like this," she thought. "I could invite——" Then her thoughts strayed off to what Miss Brown had said in the store about "having a little," and she sighed. Some girls were so fortunate!

"The baby is perfectly fine!" said Celia Brown. "Look how the little monkey has pulled my hair! She

did that when we were bathing her. Ada's is worse than mine. Ada is getting her ready for bed. You may see her for a moment before she goes. You don't know, do you, just *when* a baby of her age ought to go to bed?" She looked anxiously at Miss Eden, and even at Mr. Burns, who tried not to blush.

"How old is she?" asked Miss Eden, importantly.

"Well, naturally, we don't know, she hasn't any teeth yet."

"Can you tell their age by their teeth?" asked Mr. Burns, much interested. The girls giggled.

"Oh, no! But—yes, I suppose you can, in a way. It tells you in books when they get their first one. I must get a book. Oh, Mr. Burns, you are in the book department. Do you know of anything?"

Mr. Burns, who prided himself upon his exhaustive knowledge of his stock, brightened up. "Why, yes, there are several. I remember one that we are often asked for, 'Children, Their Mental and Moral Growth.' Then there is, 'What To Do For Baby,' and 'The Infant's First Year,' and 'From Cradle to School,' and 'Handy Helps for Home' (there is a lot about babies in that), and 'The Young Mother.' We are often asked——" Here Miss Eden giggled, and Mr. Burns came to a full stop. Celia, however, was not laughing. "I think 'What To Do for Baby' and 'The Young Mother' would be best," she mused. "I'll run over to your department at noon to-morrow and look at them—are they very expensive?"

"Not at all expensive. In fact, they are my present to the baby, if you will be so kind."

"Another present for baby!" interrupted a new voice. "Oh, Celia, if everyone is going to give her

presents we shan't have anything to give her ourselves."

The speaker who came rather slowly into the circle of light was a tall girl of rare and touching beauty. Enough like Celia to be known as her sister, she was Celia glorified, and set aside from ordinary life. To give an idea of her charm is hard, for to tell of the sweet oval of her face, her masses of brown hair with curling tendrils, her perfect mouth, delicate nose, and great mysterious eyes, leaves the main secret still untold. A stranger would scarcely have guessed that she was blind, a friend would never forget it.

"My sister Ada," said Celia quietly. "Ada, Miss Eden and Mr. Burns. They have called to see how the baby is getting on. Is she asleep?"

"Not yet, just going. Listen! there she is. She wants me back. I'll bring her in for a moment—but she must not be kissed or giggled over, or she won't sleep."

The callers solemnly promised not to kiss or giggle, and with much delightful flutter the baby was produced. She was a very little baby; unnaturally little, Mr. Burns thought. "Just too dinky for words," according to Miss Eden. She lay quite still in Ada's careful arms, surveying the glances bent upon her with calm disdain, and sucking a wrinkled thumb.

"You shouldn't allow her to do that," said Miss Eden rebukingly.

"I think she is beginning to get a tooth. One of the girls gave her a rubber ring, but she won't have it, and she has to suck something—don't you, darling precious? Isn't she lovely, Mr. Burns?"

Mr. Burns, whose eyes were fixed upon the glowing face of the blind girl, could scarcely find words to ex-

press his admiration. In fact, so incoherent was he that the child's proud foster parents were justly offended, and the baby itself began to howl.

"She's hungry, poor dear," exclaimed Ada. "Does the dearest darling want its bottle, then? Oh, I can't tell you how relieved we were to find she had been a bottle baby!"

"By Jove!" said Mr. Burns, startled. "Whatever would you——" But Miss Eden interrupted with, "Do you give her milk or food?"

"Oh, food, we can't depend on the milk," but at this the baby howled in real earnest, and was hastily taken back to bed.

"How wonderfully your sister minds her!" said Miss Eden, watching the disappearing forms of baby and nurse. "And now won't you tell us all about it? I am dying to know. It's just like a romance. Did she have a locket around her neck, or anything? Have you any clue?"

"No," said Celia gravely. "There wasn't anything like that. She isn't a story-book baby. Anyone could see that she had been ill cared for, and perhaps half starved. Her clothes were the poorest of poor—the go-cart a rickety second-hand affair, which practically fell to pieces on the way home. She is just a poor, little, deserted baby, someone that nobody wanted."

Miss Eden unaffectedly wiped away a tear with her cotton glove. "Isn't it dreadful? And there wasn't anything with her at all?"

Celia hesitated, and then said frankly, "Yes, there was a note. A horrible note. I will show it to you, and then I am going to forget all about it. We found it pinned to her dress."

Crossing to an old desk at the other side of the

room, she took from it a folded piece of rather dirty paper and handed it to Mr. Burns. With the girls looking breathlessly over his shoulder, he held the paper to the light and read, in sprawling and illiterate characters, these words:

"She was one too many. Her father won't keep her, and I can't. She ain't been named yet."

Mr. Burns, in a sudden impulse of indignation, struck the piece of paper with an emphatic finger. "By Jove, that's cool! A case of cold-blooded desertion if ever there was one!"

"Horrible!" agreed Miss Eden.

Celia, blushing, snatched the paper back. "I think I'll burn it."

"No!" Mr. Burns' tone was one of startled protest. "You mustn't do that, you know." For a moment he had an impression that all women were fools (except, perhaps, that lovely blind girl who had come into the room like a vision!) "You see, that paper is evidence. You never can tell when it might be wanted. If you do not want the little one ever to see it, hide it—but one doesn't burn evidence, you know. By Jove, no!"

Celia wavered. She considered Mr. Burns rather a pleasant young man, but his sudden tone of authority inclined to give offence. Nevertheless, he was a man, and perhaps in this case he represented the masculine point of view, and at any rate, if the paper were securely hidden it could do no harm.

"Very well," she said, "but it seems cruel to keep it. Poor baby. Well, she shall never want for care and love here."

"And oh," added Miss Eden, "how she will love you both when she knows!"

Celia's pretty mouth set itself firmly.

"She shall never know," she declared. "You read in the note that the baby had not been named. We are going to name her, Ada and I. Did you know that we had a baby sister of our own a year ago? She died with our mother, when she was two weeks old. She was to have been called Christine. This little one need never know that she is not our real little sister, Christine Brown."

Mr. Burns' honest countenance beamed with admiration at this proposal, and as for Miss Eden, her feelings compelled her to jump up and kiss Celia at once. "You dear thing!" she murmured.

"It would be too dreadful to have her live to find out that—well, what the letter says," said Celia, "and, of course, if she knew she was merely adopted she would never be contented without some knowledge of her own people."

Mr. Burns nodded sagely. "You're right there; still, I would not destroy the letter," and then he made a remark very like the one which Mr. Harcourt Flynn had already made that evening. "Things are sure uneven," he mused. "Here is someone throwing away a perfectly good baby, in a manner of speaking, and up there at the Torrance house they are going crazy over the loss of one."

Celia and Miss Eden assented vaguely. They were not vitally interested in the woes of the Torrance family. The rich gain little sympathy in trouble from their poorer neighbours. One is inclined to think that if the rich suffer it must be from their own fault. Indeed, it was something of this feeling which Celia voiced when she said, "It seems to me a rich mother who leaves her children to hired help is quite as bad as this poor

mother who deserted her baby because she couldn't support it."

The other two assented more mildly, and then the whole subject was forgotten in the deeper interest of listening to Ada singing a lullaby on the other side of the partition.

Presently another tap came to the door, and with finger on her lips, Celia tiptoed across to open it.

It was Miss Martin, of the ribbon counter, come to see how the baby was, and behind her peered the prim but kindly face of Miss Amelia Flynn.

Celia gave a startled exclamation. "Oh, Miss Flynn!" she said. "How did you——"

"I didn't, my dear. I just guessed. Mr. Flynn doesn't know and does not need to, unless you ever wish to tell him yourself. A man can be very blind when he wants to be." She gave Celia a little reassuring pat on the arm. "But I just knew how it was and I couldn't rest easy until I had seen that baby!"

CHAPTER IV

AN END AND A BEGINNING

AT the moment when the baby worshippers at 1620 Brook Street were hushing their voices while Ada sang the new little Christine Brown to sleep, there was fresh dismay in the Torrance home in Amberley Avenue. Just what had happened the frightened servants hardly knew, but the mistress of the mansion had passed from hysterical weeping into death-like stupor and back again into hysterics, and the master had come downstairs with a face so ghastly that they dared not question him. He was now shut up in the library with a detective, and so far not one of them had plucked up courage to listen at the door.

Indeed, the detective himself was startled out of his usual placidity by the sight of his client's face. Adam Torrance, the distinguished, the debonair, looked like an old man. His shoulders stooped. The hand he offered shook like an aspen. "What is it?" asked the detective anxiously. "Have you news at last?"

"News? Yes. All the news that there ever will be. The search is ended, Johnson. My child is dead!"

"Nonsense! What possible purpose——"

Adam Torrance raised his hand. "You know that I have always been afraid that this was not a case of kidnapping for money," he said quietly. "I had no reasons to give you, but I felt that it was so."

"But you said that you had no enemies."

"None that I knew of—none who would do *that*. But a man in my position must have enemies of whom he does not know, and it seems that I have had one enemy at least, a cruel one." His tone was so controlled that the detective marvelled. "Read this," he went on, handing him an envelope. "It is all there, all that we shall ever know."

The detective took the envelope eagerly—at last there was a clue! It was an ordinary envelope, not too clean. It had come by post, stamped the previous day, and contained a single sheet of paper. The paper was of the cheap, ruled variety, with nothing to distinguish it in any way. The writing on it was blurred and sprawling—either the production of a good writer trying to write badly, and succeeding very well, or of a poor writer doing his best to be legible and succeeding but poorly. From the general sloppiness of the letter, it was more probably the latter.

This was the letter :

"MR. TORRANCE, SIR,—You and your father ruined my father and us. My girl had to go into Angers' Store. I was sick and couldn't help. She couldn't make enough to live. She was so pretty, and pretty girls get hungry just like ugly ones. She's dead now, and a good thing for her she is. I don't need to speak plainer. You and your Stores killed her—and worse. I've lived to pay you back, and I've done it. I found out that you was Angers and Son, the devil that owns the Stores that don't pay a living wage. I've got your baby. We're even now. You'll never see her again. She's dead. I've paid you out."

"Horrible!" The detective's ruddy face had paled. "But you surely do not take this at its face value?"

Adam Torrance, who had sunk into a chair, made no reply for a moment, and then, without looking up, "I think I do, Johnson," he said. "Don't you?"

"No, certainly not. That is—er——" the detective hesitated. "Of course, I can't say definitely, off-hand. It seems too awful. Who is this woman?"

"She doesn't say," listlessly.

"But—was there anyone——"

"Whom my father and I ruined? Probably. In the way of business some always go to the wall. I believe we have always tried to act honourably, however. I think that neither he nor I ever willingly ruined anyone. As to the other—what she says about the girl"—a look of horror came into his tired face—"that can't be true, can it, Johnson? I admit that I have never interfered very much in the management of the Stores, but once I remember reading something about inadequate wages being paid to girls, and I spoke about it to Davies. We went into things a little, and he convinced me that we were paying what we ought, according to profits; but it seemed very little! I told him, then, never to employ any girls but such as had their own homes and something else to depend upon, so as to avoid the possibility of that—that sort of thing. I gave positive orders."

Johnson touched the letter with his fingers. His detective instinct began to assert itself.

"This girl, apparently, had a home," he remarked. "If we are to accept the letter, she lived with her mother—that would come within your orders all right."

The other man's face seemed to grow still whiter.

"My God, I never thought of that! And the mother was ill—an added expense—and—oh, horrible!"

"Probably the whole thing is a fake."

"Do you think so—candidly?"

"Can't say off-hand. It must be looked into."

"You have no clue whatever?"

"None. It was done the slickest I ever saw. *If* that woman did it she's a wonder! And yet, if she'd been watching her chance—perhaps it was done easier than it looks. That nurse, she may have left the baby longer than she said, and babies are so much alike, and there are so many of them. A change of dress, and there you are!"

"Do you think any person would write like that for—for a *joke*?"

"Not unless the person were a fiend," promptly.

"Nor do I. And that is why I—— Oh, I—I believe it, Johnson!"

The detective turned away under pretence of re-examining the letter.

"If it's no fake," he said slowly, "it's probable that the one who wrote it is a little shy in the upper story. I've seen revenge letters like this before. They generally come from those who are hardly responsible. That would account, partly, for the cunning of the thing. Does—does Mrs. Torrance know?"

"I've told her that I have reason to fear that the child is dead."

The detective made no comment.

"She fainted. But on the whole, I think the strain is lessened. If our child is dead—at least, no harm can come to her. She is beyond harm now." His head sank into his hands again, but he aroused himself. "Do all you can to find out the truth," he said, "and

let us know soon ! Johnson, how do you account for the fact that she knew about Angers and Son ? ”

“ Can’t say. Perhaps she shadowed Davies. Perhaps she found out by accident. ”

“ I must find out. I must sift all that she says about the Stores. If it is true, then Davies—— ”

“ Davies is a good manager, Mr. Torrance. You may be unjust. You are hardly fit to judge just now, if you will permit me to say so. If there are reforms needed, make them, but don’t take things by hearsay—find out first, Mr. Torrance, *find out first!* ” The detective’s tones were so earnest that they surprised himself. It was not often that he permitted himself to offer a client advice not strictly in the line of business, but Adam Torrance seemed to be in a state of mind in which men do unreasonable things. It would be too bad, thought Mr. Johnson, if he should turn Socialist or anything like that !

The father, however, seemed scarcely to have heard him. His head was buried in his hands again, and he made no reply. After a moment’s indecision, the detective, respecting his silence, went quietly from the room.

Outside, the solemn butler stepped up to him respectfully. “ Any news, sir ? ” But before he could answer, Mrs. Torrance’s maid came down the stairs wiping her red eyes. “ There’s news enough, ” she said. “ The dear little baby is dead. And the poor mistress !—hark, listen to her now ! ”

Through the quietness of the beautiful hall rang a woman’s cry : “ Elice, my baby Elice ! ”

Down in the third floor back of 1620 Brook Street, a tiny child slept peacefully in a cradle hastily fashioned

out of a clothes basket. Over the cradle leant two young girls, and while one shaded the lamp with her hand the other leaned still closer, and (in spite of certain principles in regard to the non-kissing of babies), left a light caress upon her placid forehead.

"Sleep well, little Christine," said Celia. "If one mother did not want you, you've found two mothers who do."

CHAPTER V

“NEVER ! NEVER ! ”

SIXTEEN years which may work miracles with the suburbs of a city may very well leave the older portions almost untouched. Here, for lack of space to build in, building has ceased ; the streets, the pavements, the outward aspect of things remain the same, however much of changing life has passed them by. It is here, in the heart of the city, that the returning traveller recognises his native place, and feels at home again. One could, for instance, feel a comforting sense of the permanence of things by just walking into the Stores of Angers and Son after a sixteen years' absence. Good old Angers' ! It gave one such a comfortable feeling to find it still there. Of course, in sixteen years Angers' had grown, but it had grown mostly into the air, so that its face was like that of a child who has grown taller without losing his familiar aspect. Successive coats of paint are only changes in modes of dressing and make no real difference. Inside, the changes were mostly in extent. There were openings upward and vistas where none had been before. There were more elevators ; there were moving stairways ; the aisles were wider ; the departments larger ; the whole concern bigger, busier, and more imposing. And yet one could not see much real change in Angers'.

Take the ribbon counter, for instance. In the course

of the sixteen years it had been moved almost all over the ground floor, but had now, in the process of shifting, come back to the exact place it had occupied when one visited it before. True, it was a glorified ribbon counter, with multiplied pyramids and superfine glass cases, and yet it was wonderfully like that other counter where a shabby go-cart had been left upon the occasion of a ribbon sale sixteen years ago. There were no go-carts there now, for none were allowed inside the doors; instead, one could find upon the top floor a playroom for waiting children—Angers' believed in keeping up to date.

But if there was little real change in the identity of the Stores themselves, the personnel of their various staffs of workers was almost completely altered. One searched eagerly for a familiar face. There used to be such a nice girl to whom one always went for gloves—one missed her; and the girl in the book department who could really recommend a good book, was gone. Why! they were all different! Or was that a familiar face at the ribbon counter? One thought probably not, for it is harder to know a person after sixteen years than to recognise a store.

If one were really interested, however, one might recognise an old acquaintance in Mr. Harcourt Flynn, no longer floor-walker, but now manager of the furniture department, with much added dignity, and a little office and telephone of his own. One might have recognised Mrs. Harcourt Flynn also, had she happened to be doing some shopping, for this fortunate person was no less than Miss Twiss, that tall, dark girl with the large mouth, who used to be head of the ribbon counter, and who once came very near losing her place through carelessness in instructing her subordinates as to the rules

regarding go-carts. Mr. and Mrs. Flynn made a fine-looking couple, and Mr. Flynn was much respected in Angers'. He was not an unkind man, but it had become quite a tradition of the Stores that he was a man who would stand no nonsense, and who insisted that things go smoothly in his department. (Incidentally, there was quite a little romance about this marriage, which we shall have to take for granted.) Many faces there were in the Stores, most of them quite new, some half-remembered, some almost haunting in their blurred resemblances. Among the last, one might place the face of the present head of the ribbon department. Did one know her, or did one not? One puzzled over it, and then, if one had a very good memory for faces, one remembered; and with recognition came a pang of regret, for this tired-faced, faded woman was surely that pretty young girl with the fresh blue eyes and enchanting smile, who had been a "new" girl in Angers' sixteen years ago. Yes, upon second glance there was no doubt about it. It was Celia Brown who stood there—but Celia Brown a girl no longer!

One brand new thing the Stores had, and that was a new manager. Since Mr. Davies' day there had been two new managers. No one knew what had happened to Mr. Davies, no one cared, either—it was so long ago—but there had been talk at the time of some mysterious falling out with the Board. This autocratic body had become dissatisfied with Mr. Davies, and Mr. Davies had disappeared forthwith. With him went the tradition of the Board; for it leaked out, in a gossiping fashion, that the Stores were really owned by Mr. Adam Torrance, who used to live in that swell house with colonial pillars, opposite the Gardens, you know. But

this fact did not excite the interest that it might have excited, since Mr. Torrance had been abroad for years, travelling the world over; at first, in search of health for his wife (who had never been the same, poor thing, since their little baby had been made away with in so shocking a manner), and, after her death, in search of forgetfulness for himself.

Meanwhile, the Stores underwent the usual vicissitudes of stores whose owner is an absentee, but through it all they made money, which, after all, is the chief end of stores. They were abreast of the times also; witness the playroom for children, the moving stairways, and the careful number of stools behind each counter for the comfort of the clerks. This last innovation might seem, to the uninitiated, an almost useless extravagance, for, as the watchword of the Stores was quick service, and as the prosperity of the Stores was great, none of the clerks had ever any time to sit down, and were apt only to stumble over the stools when in a hurry.

It was upon this obvious inconsistency that Mrs. Harcourt Flynn (down town to do a little shopping), remarked one day when, upon leaving her husband's private office, she paused at the ribbon counter for a few moments' chat with Miss Celia Brown.

“*What* do they have those stools for?” she asked. “It seems to me that they do the customers far more good than they do you girls. Makes them feel better to see them there, I suppose, so that after they have kept you on your feet for an hour or two, matching ribbons that won't match, they can go home and talk comfortably about the conveniences provided for the comfort of shopgirls! Tell me now, Celia, frankly, have you sat down to-day?”

Celia (it was indeed no wonder that one had failed at first glance to recognise her) smiled ruefully. "Really, I—I don't remember," she said.

"That's a fib! You know quite well that you haven't. And, Celia, when do you get your holidays? Don't put me off, because I have an address I want to give you, a nice quiet place, where you can really get some rest. It worries me to see you looking so tired." Mrs. Flynn's sharp, black eyes rested affectionately upon her friend's pale face.

"I go off in a week or so," answered Celia, "but I am not going away this year—excuse me, Fanny, there is a customer waiting."

"Let her wait, it won't hurt her. Now, Celia, you *are* going away. I'm coming over to see you, and I'll bring the address. I'll give those girls a piece of my mind. I'll tell Ada that you are killing yourself."

"Oh, please," began Celia, but the voice of the irate customer, who, like Louis XVIII., had almost been obliged to wait, cut short her appeal, and Mrs. Flynn, annihilating the customer with a look, swept loftily away.

"Are you the head of this department?" demanded the customer; then, as Celia bowed, "Well, I would like you to match this ribbon; your assistant tells me that you haven't any apricot of this exact shade, but I know better. I bought this ribbon here only yesterday."

Celia took the scrap handed to her and examined it.

"The apricot we have is a shade darker, madam," she said politely.

The customer put up her glasses. "But it's impossible! It's a strange thing if you clerks cannot

recognise your own ribbons. This ribbon was bought here.”

“I think not.” Celia was still polite.

“Excuse me, I bought it—at least, my sister bought it here yesterday. It can’t be all sold out in one day. If you will let me see all the apricot shades——”

“Certainly.” Celia tried hard to keep the weariness out of her voice as she lifted down the pile of ribbon bolts.

“Are these *all* there are?”

“These are all, madam.”

“Well, it’s most extraordinary! I know my sister said that she bought the ribbon here, or if it wasn’t here it was at Clark’s. If you are sure there are no others——”

“These are absolutely all, madam.”

“Then it must have been at Clark’s. How provoking! One would think that in a store of this size”—but Celia’s attention was already claimed by another ribbon seeker, and she turned away.

“Atrocious how rude these clerks are getting,” sighed she of the apricot ribbon. “That girl positively turned her back upon me while I was still speaking. I’ll mention it to the floor-walker; it will be a kindness to the firm.”

As a result of this kindness the floor-walker looked a little more sharply than usual at Celia. He was used to complaints of fussy women, and, being a just man as floor-walkers go, he gave them usually no more attention than they deserved. But upon hearing this complaint it suddenly occurred to him that the head of the ribbon department had not been looking herself for some time; observed critically, there were serious defects in her appearance. She was extraordinarily

pale, she stooped, she looked distressingly tired! Her usual prim uprightness had suffered some strange eclipse; even her hair seemed faded, and the grey showed plainly in the brown. It was evident to a less interested person than the floor-walker that Miss Brown was "going off" in looks, and no one knew better than he how fatal such a going off might be. Customers like to be served by bright-looking girls. They resent the very appearance of illness.

"If she doesn't spruce up after her holiday," thought Mr. Page, "she'll have to be transferred to mantles or something." Then, with a shake of his head, "But I'm afraid she hasn't any figure for mantles, poor girl, and no aptitude either, most likely. She has been in the ribbons a long time."

A very long time it seemed to Celia Brown—all her life almost! The years before she had entered Angers' seemed as if they must have belonged to the life of another person. And yet, how quickly the time had gone! Something in the weariness she felt just now made her remember with sudden acuteness her first week behind the ribbon counter, when the long strain of standing had racked her nerves and muscles with strange pain. The girls had been kind, they had told her she would get over it, and she had got over it; that phase had passed. She had learned to stand all day without fainting at night, and she had grown used to being tired. From a new girl she had become a smart clerk, and then a responsible sales-lady, and then head of the ribbon department. This she had remained, because there was really no further promotion for her, and the work was comparatively light.

She often encouraged herself with thoughts of its comparative lightness, and to-night, as she trudged

wearily home to save her street car fare, she tried to think of it harder than ever.

“If I were in the mantles, now,” she told herself, “it would be so much worse,” but something bright and sharp in the back of her brain remarked sarcastically, “*You* in the mantles, you wouldn’t stand it a day!” “I know it,” she answered the voice, “and that is why I am so fortunate to be in the ribbons.” “You won’t stand the ribbons much longer,” said the voice jeeringly. She tried to silence it, but it managed to inquire with brisk insistence, “And then what are you going to do, *what* are you going to do *then?*” It was no use refusing to listen to it, so she began to argue the matter as she had so often done before, as indeed she seemed to be always doing of late.

“After my holiday I shall be quite strong again,” she asserted bravely, and, before the voice had had time to object to this, she added: “When Christine is able to help I will not have to be so afraid of losing my place. I believe it is partly fear that is unnerving me.” “It will be years before Christine can help,” whispered the voice. “She is sixteen now, and even if you give up all idea of sending her to the university she can’t teach on her certificate until she is eighteen.” “At the most that is only two years,” said her braver self; but the voice was relentless: “It might just as well be two centuries. You can’t hold out one year, let alone two.” “I can,” said determination. “You can’t,” said that inner knowledge; then, while she struggled for more confidence to face it down, it began to insinuate: “You might give up some of your fine ideas for Christine. She is willing. Now, if you were to allow her to enter the Stores——”

“Never! never!” cried Celia. So intense was her

denial that she spoke aloud, but no one noticed in the busy street. "Never! never!" she repeated, and her hands in their worn cotton gloves pressed the fingers cruelly into the palms. The voice, silenced for the time, sank back again beneath the surface of her mind. She walked on, out of breath with the battle, but with a certain warm confidence in her heart.

CHAPTER VI

CHRISTINE

As Celia turned the corner at Brook Street, and, with home in sight, quickened her lagging pace, it is safe to say that she noticed few of the changes which the sixteen years had wrought. Yet Brook Street was changed. A stranger would have noticed at once that the entire character of the street had altered since that night when Celia had trundled the shabby go-cart home. Even at that time the neighbourhood had long ceased to be very desirable; now its aspect was distinctly forbidding. One by one the shabby houses had given place to tenement or "apartment" houses, whose ground floors were devoted largely to second or third class shops and eating-houses, together with the inevitable pool-rooms and corner saloons. From a shabby, quiet street, with an atmosphere of its own, it had become a shabby, noisy street with no atmosphere at all; from being merely undesirable it had become vulgar.

The house where the Misses Brown lodged had always looked out of place in this street, now its presence there was so strange as to cause continual comment. At a little distance it was a rather imposing place; when the setting sun beamed upon its many windows it might, at a little distance, have seemed a palace. Beside it was the only vacant lot on the long street. It was surrounded by a wall, and, at a

little distance, one might have imagined a garden there. Many a passer-by had woven romance about this strangely appearing house, and even in unromantic Brook Street it had earned for itself the name of the "House of Windows." So, in the most unlikely places, do the most unlikely people feel the influence of the unusual and with groping fingers touch the fringes of the skirts of fancy.

Celia never saw the sun upon the House of Windows without a stirring which was almost pain. It looked so like some fairy palace; she knew it so well for what it was. For as one came nearer all the glamour faded; the illusion was ruthlessly destroyed. Not one whit better than its neighbours was the House of Windows. Better? Rather worse, indeed, for it was older, dirtier, more unkempt than they. That it survived at all was due to its being part of an estate which could not be disposed of until the coming of age of a young heir. It had been allowed to stand, therefore, growing a little dingier, a little more out of repair, a little more at odds with its surroundings every year.

The growing change was so gradual that it was almost imperceptible. One was used to a thing before one noticed it, and when one's attention was drawn to it one felt that it had always been like that. To be sure, Celia had observed that the window curtains displayed behind the glass became steadily poorer in quality and showed a growing tendency to smuttiness as tenant succeeded tenant. She noticed that these tenants, when she met them on the stairs, grew constantly more down-at-heel and untidy of head, but the real significance of such metamorphoses is not always apparent to those who live in daily contact with them.

Everybody knew that the Misses Brown were the

oldest tenants of the House of Windows. One of them, the youngest, had been born there it was understood. At least, no one in the house could remember the time when her yellow head had not flashed like a ray of sunshine through the rather dreary corridors. The sisters kept to their old rooms, careless of the fact that their white curtains and shining window-glass became more and more of an incongruity. Moving, to Ada the blind sister, would have meant a painful uprooting, while to Celia the growing drawbacks of the place were accepted from stern necessity. Nowhere else could she find rooms for which she could pay, within walking distance of her work. As for Christine, the youngest, she was of so gay and bright a nature that she could have made sunshine in a darker place than this. Like Celia, she often watched the old house when the sun made it blaze with reflected glories, and no amount of after disillusion ever quite robbed it of the borrowed splendour.

And then there was the garden. Strange how the name which has once described a place will linger when all claim to it has gone. Once, that enclosed place to the side of the House of Windows had been a garden. Only a small part of it was left now, but once there had been space for the romplings of many schoolgirls; there had been soft grass, green trees and flowers. Now, although it was rank with weeds, hideous with tin cans and waste paper and odorous only of Brook Street, it was called a garden still.

Out of the magic of the name the blind girl had fashioned a reality which was one of the joys of her shadowed life. To everyone else an eyesore, it was to her still a thing of beauty, a garden which stretched before her sightless eyes and blossomed in her mind with ever changing loveliness. She never

walked there; the gate was always locked—a merciful provision—but from her third story window she often leaned out over it imagining the beauty which lay below. No one undeceived her, for the girls kept much to themselves, and incoming tenants never failed to receive due warning from the good-hearted Irish janitress.

“Sure, she thinks it’s a foine garden, poor thing,” she would say. “And it’s a great comfort to her who’s needin’ all the comfort she’s gettin’. You’ll just be kind enough not to be undeceivin’ her at all.”

Celia, for her part, lied shamelessly and was cheerfully abetted by Christine. But the real gardener, the one who planted the garden and caused it to bloom in due season, was Mr. Thomas Alexander Burns, once clerk in the book department of Angers and Son, and now manager for Brindley of the book-shop. He lavished upon this dream garden the thought and skill which would have made the fortunes of a dozen ordinary gardeners, and it was wonderful how his plantings prospered. Only once in a long while did failure come, and then its introduction was most skilfully arranged and with an eye to necessary contrast. The fact was that Mr. Burns, while still considering himself an unsuccessful suitor for Celia’s hand, had been for sixteen years the unresisting captive, the willing slave, of her blind sister. He loved her as a knight loves his honour, as a devotee loves the saint he worships. She was too high above him for mere earthly love, but he served her faithfully without hope of return and indeed without the consciousness of serving. It never occurred to him that Celia could see what he kept so well hidden or that her persistent refusal of him was due to anything save a natural inability to care for so uninteresting a person. But Celia had known of Tommy’s

devotion from the first, and the knowledge had swayed her more than once when, unusually weary, she had been tempted to accept the peace and security which might be hers as his wife.

She thought of this possible means of escape that night as she mounted the stairs in the House of Windows, and, as usual, when her thoughts turned in that direction, she sighed. She knew that round of thought so well. It was like a treadmill; always she came back to the same starting point. It was useless to consider it, but somehow she always did consider it when the stairs seemed as long as they did to-night.

Perhaps her step was heavier also, or perhaps someone was listening for it with keen ears, for she had not passed the second landing before a door upon the third floor flew open letting more light upon the dusty stairs, and from somewhere above her there floated a sibilant whisper, "Sister Ann, Sister Ann, do you see anyone coming?"

Tired though she was, Celia smiled. "Only the long road and the swaying grass and the dust blowing before the wind!" she answered dutifully, and the next moment she was being kissed violently upon the cheeks by a vision with yellow hair.

"I knew it was you!" said the vision. "But, of course, it might have been Tommy; and I did not want to bother coming down for him! Take hold of my arm, darling, and let me pull you up. You are late. The muffins will be spoiled. Oh, Celia, we had a visitor to-day!"

Celia's face in the dimness of the stairway grew a little whiter. "A visitor? Was it Mr. Banks, our trustee?"

"How mean of you to guess! Yes, and he left a

note for you. Ada and I have been speculating. Perhaps someone has died and left us some money—lots of money.”

“I’m afraid not, dear.”

“Well, you don’t know! Not that we want anyone to die, but if someone simply had to die it would be nice to be left the money. Did you see Tommy?”

“No.”

“How tired your voice sounds. Well, Tommy is coming over for tea. We have two extra muffins. He could eat three, but we simply can’t afford it—unless this man who died has left us some money.”

“What nonsense you talk, Christine! I believe this wild idea has really excited you. Let me look at your face?”

It was indeed a face worth seeing. There in the dingy dimness of the hall it gleamed like some clear gem. Here was the greatest miracle of those sixteen years! For this young girl with the first breath of womanhood upon her, strong and graceful in body, beautiful in face, was no other than the baby of the go-cart—a changeling indeed!

“Tommy has sent me a poem, too,” she prattled on as she helped Celia to unpin her hat, and with many little feminine touches straightened her collar and patted her hair. “You know I told him that he was guilty of making invidious distinctions by sending them all to you. Besides, it must be tiresome always to write poems to the same person.”

The blind girl looked up with a smile. “I suppose it would depend upon the person,” she said.

Celia looked at her keenly. It seemed to her that Ada was strangely blind in more ways than one.

“Mine is just as nice as Celia’s, anyway,” said

Christine. "Listen and I'll read it before he comes. Ahem! This is the first stanza—I always want to say 'verse,' but Tommy says that stanza is proper.

"Hazel-eyes and honey-hair—('That's me!')—
Do you dream you are so fair;
Do you guess your budding sweetness—
Ambushed yet in incompleteness
Folded round with soft surprise—
Honey-hair and hazel-eyes?'

What do you think of that?"

"It is in Tommy's best Burnsonian manner," laughed Celia.

"I rather like 'honey-hair,'" mused Christine; "I wonder what made him think of that?"

Celia looked at the girl's shining head with quick pride, but she said carelessly, "Now that I think of it your hair is honey-coloured. The shade is rather uncommon."

"Is it? But what does Tommy mean by calling me 'incomplete'? Do you notice anything missing, Celia? Am I 'shy' of anything? Why," with a little gurgle of laughter, "it is just another way of saying that I am not all there! I've a good mind not to give the wretch his extra muffin."

A heartrending groan followed this terrible sentence, for the culprit had come tiptoe up the stairs and had met the common fate of all listeners.

"Serves you right!" declared Christine, but her glance softened at the sight of a suggestive parcel under Tommy's arm. "Is it a book, Tommy?" she asked eagerly.

"Yes," said Mr. Burns sadly. "It is a book, and

yet for all practical purposes it is not a book." He laid the parcel carefully upon a shelf and placed his hat above it. Christine giggled.

"I suppose you mean 'no muffin, no book,' " she said. "In that case you can have your old muffin. Whom is it for?"

Tommy gravely removed his hat from the parcel. "Well, it's a kind of family book, I guess," he remarked. "First you said you wanted a new book, and then Celia said she had finished the one she was reading to Ada, and then Ada mentioned that she would like something of de Morgan's, and, of course, de Morgan wrote a new book at once, and——"

"And you felt it your duty to buy it!" snapped Celia. Her tone was so sharp and the irritation it expressed so uncalled for that the others looked at her in surprise. Even Tommy's equanimity was disturbed. His rather round blue eyes grew rounder. It was so odd of Celia to turn on a fellow like that! He knew of old how set she was against accepting any gift from him, but a book—he ran a bewildered hand through his hair, making it look more like a stubble field than ever.

"Don't do that, for goodness' sake!" exclaimed Celia. "It makes you look exactly like Tommy Traddles!" and with this she disappeared into the adjoining room and slammed the door.

"Well, that was a hard one," said Tommy cheerfully, and then, since every word could be heard over the partition, he asked in pantomime whatever was the matter with Celia?

Christine, also in pantomime, declared that Celia was feeling very tired, and Ada, who through it all had stood in quiet wonder, seemed to understand as well as

if she had seen. She nodded gently and with a gesture indicated that they had better take no notice.

Nevertheless, there was constraint upon them as they sat down at the round table. They could not talk naturally, and nothing seemed to taste properly until the door opened and Celia came back—a chastened Celia.

“Sorry I was rude, Tommy,” she said, taking her tea. “The fact is that you are almost too much of a blessing sometimes, and I am getting irritable in my old age, and then,” with an attempt at lightness, “there was Christine’s poem. It was really much better than the last one you sent me. It’s not fair!”

“Really,” said Tommy delightedly. “Do you think I am improving? I wanted to ask you, but I was afraid of your chaffing, you know. I think it’s rather better myself, eh?” He asked the question of Celia, but he looked at Ada. His voice was hopeful.

“Much better,” said Celia.

“Lovely!” said Christine, eating muffin.

Ada, who was still looking faintly troubled, said nothing. Tommy’s face fell.

“If I only had another name,” he reflected despondingly. “But a man can’t write up to a name like mine.”

Christine nodded sympathetically. “We could lend you ours for poetical purposes,” she said kindly. “Brown is such a nice flat name. Nothing to live up to, all on a dead level. ‘Brown!’ Somehow it never seems quite as if it belonged to me!”

Celia dropped her spoon with a faint clatter. Ada’s face lifted with its listening look, and Tommy’s face grew violently red.

“I mean,” went on the girl unconsciously, “that

there are so many Browns that it seems to be a kind of common-property name."

"Yes, of course, just so," stammered Tommy. But somehow a restraint had fallen upon the table talk, and presently Ada rose and went over to the open window. Standing there she seemed scarcely changed at all from the girl of sixteen years ago. The years had left her peculiar loveliness almost untouched; with that strange immunity of the blind she had escaped unscathed. Although but three years younger than Celia, there was no thread of grey in her dark hair, and her forehead was as unlined as a child's. Save for a deeper note in her voice and a soft seriousness of manner she seemed scarcely older than the girl Christine. Tommy's eyes followed her with worshipful reverence.

"It begins to feel like autumn," she said. "Come and see the garden, Tommy. What a pity that asters have no perfume!"

"Ah, but you forget the colours," said Tommy instantly. "Massed against that green hedge they satisfy without perfume. They are such big, straight, sturdy fellows, flaunting, yet brave, like soldiers."

"Yes," eagerly. "Go on, Tommy. You make me see it all. Tell me about the golden-rod in the east corner." She leaned out over the dream garden and Tommy went on. He told of golden-rod and of the late dahlias and of how the wind had blown some yellow leaves, first warning of dead summer, upon the garden walk; but he looked only at her face. For both of them the garden was real, the weeds and the tin cans did not exist; he was a gardener and she was a princess in an enchanted land.

The other two watched them with wondering eyes. "Doesn't he do it well?" whispered Christine. "When

he talks to Ada like that, Tommy is a real poet. Say, Celia, did you ever notice——”

“Yes,” said Celia dryly. “I have noticed.” She drew a breath of relief. “If it is so plain that the child notices it,” she thought, “I need never worry over that particular question again. However bad things may be I can never take that way out.”

“Christine,” she said abruptly. “Get me the note Mr. Banks left for me.”

Wondering a little at her tone the girl handed her the envelope. Celia opened it slowly. She had already guessed what the note contained and had braced herself to bear the confirmation of her fears. Mr. Banks wrote briefly that he was sorry that he must confirm the news of which he had spoken to her before; the Moulton Oil Company had gone into liquidation and the shares upon which Miss Brown had been receiving dividends were now worthless. He expressed his sorrow and his willingness to be of service.

“Well!” exclaimed Christine, who was almost dancing with impatience. “Is—is anybody dead?”

“Dead?” said Celia stupidly. “Oh, no. At least, there is no fortune left to us. It is merely a—business letter.”

“Oh!” There was disappointment in Christine’s tone. She would have liked to have seen the letter, but Celia did not offer to show it. Instead she changed the subject.

“Isn’t that someone on the stairs, Christine? Open the door. The landing is so dark. Fanny said she intended coming over.”

“Oh, dear!” Christine’s sigh was heartfelt. She did not care for the bustling ways of Mrs. Harcourt Flynn.

"She is a dear good friend," said Celia warmly. "But listen, she wants me to go away for my holidays. And mind, you are not to encourage her in it. I don't want to go."

"Aren't you all going, as usual?" asked Tommy in surprise.

"Why, I thought——" began Christine. But Mrs. Flynn's brisk voice interrupted.

"Those stairs get worse and worse!" she declared without preliminaries. "Why you girls stay here I can't see! You'll break your necks some day. It's a scandal. Can't you make your landlord-man do anything? How d'ye do, Tommy? Why can't you see the man for Celia?"

"Celia won't let me." Tommy's tone was injured.

"No, I won't. The last time Tommy complained Ada was just worried to death by men coming to 'see about it.' As many as nine different people came and then nobody did anything. There isn't any landlord, really; we pay our rent to an estate."

"Then I would move. There is a nice apartment house going up now just around the corner from us. Very reasonable rent. I'll get Sam to speak for you."

"Well, I never!" murmured Christine. But Celia, alarmed, interposed hastily, "No, Fanny, don't do that! We hate the idea of moving." She made a slight gesture in Ada's direction. Mrs. Flynn's eyebrows went up. She liked Ada, but Celia was her special favourite and she thought her continual sacrifice for her blind sister somewhat overdone.

"Well, you know best. If you trip on that loose board and kill yourself, don't blame me. I've warned you. And here is the address I promised you. You won't know yourself after a fortnight of Lakeview Farm."

Celia took the piece of paper and thanked her. "Only I'm afraid we aren't going away this year, Fanny," she added as if by an afterthought.

"Ada," said Mrs. Flynn, "are you going to let your sister kill herself?"

Ada turned a startled face from the garden. Tommy Burns turned with her, his face flushing a slow deep red. He never could become accustomed to hearing Ada addressed as Mrs. Flynn addressed her. But that lady went right on:

"I may say that I think Celia is looking badly, very badly indeed! She needs a complete rest and change. You have influence with her, Ada, use it before it is too late. That is all I have to say. I came especially to say it. I told Celia I intended to let you know the truth. Celia is being killed by overwork. No thanks, I do not wish any tea. I have dined. Tommy, if you will see me down these stairs I shall be obliged. I do not wish to die just yet. Good-bye, Celia. I will see if I can get you an extra week of holiday."

Her departure was as sudden as her coming had been.

"Oh, dear, I hope she doesn't!" said Celia, in a frightened whisper.

"Such a dear, good friend!" murmured Christine *sotto voce*, and then, as the sound of Tommy's returning steps were audible, she called sharply and in Mrs. Flynn's best manner, "Tommy, if you trip on that loose board and kill yourself, don't blame me. I warned you!"

Laughing, she sprang down a few of the steps to meet him, and then in the darkness of the hall Mr. Burns was surprised by a vigorous pinch upon his arm. "Don't tease Celia any more to-night about going

away," cautioned Christine. "She's tired out and there's something wrong—I'm sure of it."

So it happened that Celia, inwardly bracing herself against their united persuasions, was surprised, and perhaps a little hurt—so strangely are we made—to find that the question of holidays was not referred to any more that night. True, Ada's face was troubled and questioning, and Tommy kept looking at her in a startled way which got on Celia's nerves, but neither of them returned to the subject of Mrs. Flynn's visit. As for Christine, she was so gay that before long she had them all laughing with her, at an absurd mimicry of Mrs. Flynn's pompous "I have dined."

CHAPTER VII

THROUGH THE WALL

LONG after Tommy had gone and Christine lay curled up like a sleepy kitten on her Davenport bed in the sitting-room, Celia lay with aching eyes very wide awake. Ada, whose slow deliberate movements usually kept her longer than her sisters, was still moving softly about the room. Celia wished that she too would lie down and sleep so that she might be alone to argue herself into quietness. But when at last the soft rustling ceased, Ada did not slip in beside her as usual. Instead, she sat down on the edge of the bed on Celia's side, and in the darkness Celia felt a hand feel for and clasp her own.

"Celia!" said Ada's voice wistfully.

Celia lay very still. Perhaps she might succeed in pretending to be asleep. But the ruse was useless. It is not easy to deceive the quickened senses of the blind. Ada's hand only tightened its clasp, and her voice went on:

"Celia, aren't you going to tell me what is the matter? Do you really think that the blind see nothing? Aren't you going to let me help?"

"I think it is just that I am rather tired, dear," said Celia weakly.

Ada nodded. "I know. You are overtired, but it is more than that. You'll have to tell me, Celia—oh, if

I could only make you see how cruel it is to keep it from me! If you only knew how dreadful it is to be spared everything. Just think, I am younger and stronger than you. I have never been able to work as you have. All these years I have been compelled to see you work beyond your strength that Christine and I might be comfortable. Wasn't that hard enough? Only our love has made it possible for me to go on living——"

"Ada!"

"Didn't you ever guess it, dear? The bitterness of being helpless? But love and confidence has kept it sweet. And now if you refuse me confidence I may begin to doubt the love. I know there is something troubling you. You must let me share it."

"Can't you trust me, Ada?"

"Yes, if you trust me, Celia. It must be mutual trust, or nothing."

Celia moved restlessly. The blind girl's hand drifted like a wandering snowflake over her hot face. "There is a new wrinkle here—and here," said Ada. "Your voice is different, and for a whole week you haven't laughed."

Celia drew the wandering hand away.

"Don't, dearest! If you feel like that I'll tell you. I only thought that it seemed selfish to worry you since——"

"Since I cannot help," finished Ada quietly.

"You can help. It will be helping just to tell you. You are right. I should have told you at once. It's about Christine. Ada, I—I'm afraid she won't be able to go back to school."

"Not go back to school? Not matriculate?"

"I don't see how. You know that the interest on

most of the shares that mother left us has been growing less and less——”

“Yes; but——”

“Last week the company failed. Those shares are now worth nothing. There will be no more interest on them. The others bring in very little.

“You see,” went on Celia after a moment’s silence, “when Christine came to us we were comparatively rich. Our shares were bringing in seven per cent., and that, with what I earned, kept us easily. In fact, there was a rule in the Stores at that time that its employees must have some contributory means of support. Later, as the interest on our shares declined, my wages went up and we got along. But now there is so little interest and I am getting as high wages as I shall ever be able to earn. Then, in spite of the degeneration of this place, the rent is higher; living costs almost twice as much. It doesn’t take special insight to see the result. I have thought and thought,” wearily, “I can’t see a way out.”

“Have you said anything to Tommy?”

“No.”

“Couldn’t he suggest anything?”

“He could suggest that I marry him, I suppose.”

“Oh!” said Ada innocently. “I did not think of that, and naturally you do not want to marry Tommy, nor to make him feel badly by refusing him.”

“Nor to make him feel still more badly by accepting him!” said Celia a little bitterly.

“What do you mean, dear?”

“Nothing. I merely mean that Tommy is out of the question. Every other consideration aside, no woman has the right to marry a man she does not love. On the other hand, there is Christine, our little girl!

When I brought her home that night and read that awful letter I swore that she should have a chance in life. Hundreds of times since, as I have watched her grow up so beautiful, I have sworn that she should never waste her youth and strength and beauty behind the counter! And now! now it looks as if she might have to. But not yet. Never while I have strength."

She broke down entirely, stifling her sobs in the pillow. Presently Ada wept too. She knew that the tears would do Celia good and that the comfort of a shared grief would soon bring relief. She crept into bed then, and as they lay close together she asked no more questions, but little by little Celia began to sob out her trouble; her consuming fear that her strength might give out or that she might be asked to give place to someone younger and brighter.

"Of course, going away for a holiday is out of the question," she whispered. "And if the rest at home does not give me back my strength, what shall I do?"

"There must be a way somewhere," comforted Ada, "if we can only manage for another year! If we could send Christine to the Normal she could teach until——"

"No, she cannot teach until she is eighteen, and even if she could we cannot meet the expense of sending her to the Normal School."

"Well, then we must find another way. I have always believed, like you, that Christine was destined to have her chance. It was not accident her coming to us as she did! I feel sure of it. Call it fate or Providence, what you like."

"What do you call it, Ada?"

"I call it Providence. I am in the dark, you know. I must hold close."

From the other side of the partition where Christine

was supposed to be peacefully asleep came a curious sound. It was in the nature of a gulp, quickly smothered.

"What was that?" asked Celia uneasily.

"Just Christine moving. But she is sound asleep. I made sure of that before I came in."

"Dear idiots!" mused Christine, who, wide awake and sitting up very straight in bed, was rubbing a soft ear which too close pressing against the partition had bruised. "It's their own fault if I have to learn my own family affairs by eavesdropping. They still treat me as if I were a baby. How I wish they had spoken a little louder."

Then, using her fingers for memory posts, she began with admirable patience to sort the knowledge she had gained in so reprehensible a manner. It ran something like this: There was very little money! Money had been lost somehow with the result that her school expenses would prove a serious drain, if not an impossibility. There had been something said about her going into a shop and both her sisters had wept at the prospect. (Query, why? Celia worked in a shop.) She had gathered that in any case she was not to be consulted or allowed to aid. (This indignity alone absolved her conscience in the matter of listening.) Something had been said about Tommy Burns helping, but from Celia's voice Christine gathered that this was out of the question. (Her quick intuition immediately showed her a possible reason for Celia's objection.) So far, all was plain enough, but the rest was mystery. Celia had said something about bringing her, Christine, home. (Query, where had she been? It did not sound like a home-coming from an ordinary visit.) And a letter had been mentioned, an "awful letter." What could that

mean? There was certainly mystery there. Never, since she had been old enough to take any interest in the affairs of the little household, had there been any awful letters. Perhaps it was that letter which Celia had received to-night from Mr. Banks? She sighed impatiently. It was really too bad of the girls to exclude her from a possible family secret. Secrets are such interesting things! She had not been able to hear what Celia had confided to Ada between sobs, and the part of Ada's answer which had penetrated to her ears was consoling but not enlightening. All she could gather was a general idea that her sisters were much concerned that she should have her "chance." (Query, why should they worry so about her? Because she was the youngest? That seemed to be the only possible explanation.) With her pretty brows drawn into a frown Christine sat there in the moonlight which flooded the Davenport bed and thought it all out. She was a girl of quick decisions, and as she thought her pretty lips grew firm and her eyes more determined. She looked anything but sleepy. Indeed, both Ada and Celia were peacefully dreaming before Christine slipped under the covers with a mind made up. "It's about time they found out," she murmured, "that this family performs best as a trio and not as a duet!"

CHAPTER VIII

EMPLOYMENT FOR A LADY

NEXT morning the sisters breakfasted together cheerfully. The unburdening of her heart had done Celia so much good that she was more like herself than she had been for some weeks. Ada, whose inner peace no trouble seemed able to disturb for long, was as serene as usual, and Christine was so gay that it would have been a gloomy nature indeed which would have refused to respond to her bright spirits. Nevertheless, when the dishes were put away and Celia had gone to the Stores, Christine informed Ada that she felt the need of a long walk. "And I am not going to ask you to come with me, dearest," she added, laughing, "because I am going to walk fast and furious."

Ada smiled. She was used to these sudden whims.

"In fact," went on Christine, pinning her best grey hat over her bright hair, "I am going to take a holiday and I may not even be home for lunch. It would be fun, wouldn't it, to surprise Celia and have lunch with her?"

Ada coloured faintly. "Celia took her lunch with her this morning," she said. "One gets so tired of having it down town."

"Does one?" asked Christine innocently. "I hate a cold lunch myself. Well, if I don't come home you

are not to worry. I haven't many more days now before going back to school." This last was said with a touch of girlish malice, in revenge for being treated as a baby and excluded from family councils. But the quick sadness in Ada's face brought swift remorse, and Christine had hard work to keep herself from blurting out her secret then and there. That would have spoiled everything. She must not speak too soon. Half of the flavour of the enterprise which she had decided upon during the night was in the grand surprise which its success was to be to these two unappreciative sisters. For her idea was at once to show them how shortsighted their conduct had been, and, by a grand *coup*, to place the family fortunes once more upon an easy basis.

The grand *coup*, as planned, was something in the fairy-godmother line with coals of fire added. Christine would go out for an inconsequent stroll and would return the proud possessor of a "position" with adequate salary attached—in other words, she would have become a bread-winner.

Exactly how this was to come to pass she did not know, but there is no one so hopeful as one for whose ignorance difficulties do not exist. Christine was very young, quite inexperienced and ready to believe that the whole world was her oyster. The opening of the oyster ought not to prove a difficult task. Already she had thought of one promising means, and that was the advertising sheet of the daily paper. At breakfast, under cover of reading the City news, she had picked out of a long list three desirable positions, any one of which seemed especially intended for her.

Standing on the doorstep she carefully slipped the first clipping from her glove and read it with renewed appreciation.

“WANTED—young person of good address and pleasing voice to read aloud to invalid lady, three hours daily. Generous remuneration to right person.”

Could anything be more apropos? Christine felt no doubt as to being the right person. She was not quite sure what good address might mean, but she glanced down over her trim blue skirt, white blouse and neat shoes with an innocent air of full approval. Her voice she knew was pleasing. Tommy had often told her so, and more than one of her collegiate friends had remarked upon it. It was soft and low, that most excellent thing in woman, and ought to be exactly what the invalid lady was looking for. Three hours' reading would, she felt sure, be just so much pleasure! Better than all, there was to be “generous remuneration.” Christine rather let her imagination run riot in this direction. “Generous” means many different things, but to Christine's hopeful mind it meant everything.

“Sure, 'tis a foine day agin, Miss Christine,” said the cheerful janitress in passing. Then with warm admiration: “And it's foine you're lookin' yourself!”

Christine slipped the clipping into her glove with an embarrassed air.

“Really, Mrs. Halloren? Do I look nice? Is my skirt straight? I want to look particularly nice to-day.”

Mrs. Halloren put down her pail for a better look.

“It's perfect ye are,” she declared. “If ye were me own daughter I couldn't wish ye to look foiner.”

Christine smiled with pleasure. She saw nothing incongruous in the remark and the tone of the compliment was unmistakably sincere. Christine was innocently pleased with her own good looks, but as yet

quite unconscious of anything singular in her beauty. The loveliness of youth is a fairy thing, as illusive as sunlight on water, as potent as wine, and Christine had in full measure the charm and glory of it. Her hazel eyes, dark grey in certain lights, were set rather widely apart under delicate brows. Her nose was straight and fine, her lips curving and faintly red—the only trace of colour in the warm paleness of her face; add to this a sweetly rounded chin and a glory of hair, honey-coloured, and sweeping back on either side of her brow in heavy, shining rolls, and you have a description of Christine's beauty; but not its essence. One had to see her to know that, but having seen, one was not likely to forget. Already Tommy Burns had noticed with somewhat proud annoyance that Christine was apt to be stared at in the street. He had a special scowl for anyone who dared it, a terrific scowl; and lately he had worn it so often that Christine had declared that she would not go walking with Tommy if he looked so cross!

This morning, Tommy being absent, anyone might stare to their heart's content. Christine herself would never notice it, or if she did she would not think to ascribe the admiring glances to personal cause. She floated down the streets of the city, happily dreaming, a vision of spring in autumn. And so far from self-consciousness was she that when a young man stepped quickly from a motor-car and allowed an involuntary "By Jove!" to escape him, Christine thought that he had dropped something, and turned with a child's interested eagerness to see if he picked it up. In doing so she had a momentary impression of dark eyes in a strong face, oddly flushed; then, passing on, she forgot all about them.

The young man, however, seemed not to have dropped anything. For a moment or so he stood on the pavement looking after her, a curiously arrested expression upon his face. Then, with an air of quick decision, he re-entered the car, ordering the chauffeur to go ahead, slowly. The man did not attempt to hide his surprise at the order and even ventured a protest. "This here is the address you gave me, sir," he said. "The Van Slykes live in here."

"I know; go ahead, and slowly."

The big car went on. It passed Christine again just as she turned in at the address of the invalid lady, a few blocks farther down the avenue. Christine did not notice it. Her mind was quite occupied with admiring the home where in future she hoped to spend three hours a day reading for a generous remuneration! It was a handsome place of grey stone of no particular artistic beauty, yet imposing and withal comfortable.

"By Jove!" murmured the young man again. "It's Aunt Miriam's! She's going in—what luck." But having the wisdom of the serpent he did not at once follow her.

Christine rang the bell. She was not exactly frightened, her inexperience pictured nothing but courtesy behind that handsome door. To the maid who opened it she said that she would like to see Miss—she remembered that she did not know the name.

"Miss Torrance sees no one in the morning."

"Oh, is she worse? I thought the advertisement said to call in the morning."

The maid's face changed perceptibly. The deference faded out of it. "Side entrance," she said abruptly, and closed the door.

Christine coloured faintly. She thought the maid

rude. However, she went at once to the side entrance and rang again. Another maid opened the door and looked at her with undisguised surprise. Christine again asked if she might see Miss Torrance, and adding that she was answering the advertisement in the paper.

"Miss Torrance will see you, I think," said the girl. "You're the sixth this morning, but she isn't suited yet. You'll have to wait." She led the way up a flight of stairs and into a small room at the end of a corridor. "I'll tell you when she's ready," she added, and went out.

Christine's spirits began to sink. The room in which she sat was plain and gloomy—not what one might expect from the appearance of the house at all. It struck her that it must be a special room for tradesmen or servants. It had never before occurred to her that in applying for this place she had forfeited some of the rights of caste. Social distinctions had troubled Christine as little as they trouble most sensible Canadian girls. She had thought as little about her position as a duchess might: now, for the first time, she felt troubled and uneasy. Some of the first fine flavour of her adventure was evaporating. She sat on pins and needles, flushing and paling, while three maids came down the corridor upon various pretexts, each one managing to indulge in a long stare at the new applicant. She could hear them giggling together afterwards, and her whole body grew hot. It was a great relief when word came that Miss Torrance was ready for her.

"The mistress will see you now," said the English maid who had let her in. Christine arose with alacrity, but even as she did so a bell rang sharply and the maid gave an indignant exclamation. "There she is again!"

she said. "You'd better wait till I see what it is. She never knows her own mind from one moment to another! There's the door bell, too!"

Christine resumed her chair with a sigh. There was more ringing. The saucy maids were sent flying in different directions, and then the door opened downstairs and Christine heard a man's pleasant voice in the hall. The English girl poked her head in at the door and whispered, "A visitor; you'll have to wait."

The visitor was evidently at home in the house for he came up the stairs two steps at a time. Christine saw him pass the end of the corridor and, after knocking lightly, enter the room where the maid had disappeared.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Christine. "He is sure to stay for ages!" And she felt an impulse of dislike toward the young man with the pleasant voice.

Meanwhile, in the other room, Miss Torrance surveyed the intruder with unaffected surprise.

"You, Mark!" she exclaimed, offering a frigid hand. "Is anyone dead? Of course someone is dead, Martha, hand me my salts! Don't try to break it to me, please!"

The young man shook her cold hand heartily, and not content with that kissed her soundly in continental fashion.

"Bless the boy! Don't you know that I'm an invalid? Who is dead?"

"Lots of people, auntie. But no one we know. Can't a prodigal nephew call upon his onlyest aunt without being mistaken for an undertaker?"

The onlyest aunt surveyed the prodigal nephew searchingly through her glasses.

"Hum! Well. So you came to see me, did you?"

I have my doubts. You have been in the city for a whole week——”

“Yes, by Jove, I have! How the days fly. Well, isn’t it time I came to see you?”

“If you had wanted to come——”

“I would have come sooner. Naturally, and I would have come sooner, only I couldn’t, you see. The governor has just kept me on the dead tear. It’s been awful! Fact.”

“Was part of the dead tear dancing attendance on Alice Van Slyke?” politely.

“Why, yes. *You* know, don’t you?”

This enigmatic phrase seemed so full of hidden meaning that the old lady could not, for pride’s sake, repudiate the knowledge. She nodded sagely. “Ah, *that!* Well, Alice van Slyke is a fine girl.”

“Yes. Bully!” Absently. Mark’s dark eyes had already searched every corner of the room in vain. “Yes, she is a very fine girl. She says she comes over to see you often. Old people get so lonely.”

“Do they?” with asperity. “I did not know it.”

“Oh, you’re not old, auntie. I told Alice so. And, of course you won’t be lonely now that you have that nice young girl staying with you, Miss—er—what’s-her-name?” (Mark considered this remarkably clever.)

“Oh!” The old lady’s tone was dry. “And was it Miss Van Slyke who told you that I had Miss—er—what’s-her-name staying with me?”

“No; oh, no! I just happened to see her come in at the gate.”

The old lady put down her glasses. “I see,” she said. “Martha, give me my salts! Mark, your visit to me this morning, your solicitude, is quite touching! But you know I am an invalid. I cannot bear much

excitement. You must excuse me. Incidentally, you have made a mistake. Miss—er—what's-her-name is not staying here. Martha, ring for Jane to show Mr. Wareham out."

For a moment Mark Wareham's handsome face flushed angrily, and then suddenly he laughed. His aunt smiled grimly. "You see, I know you, Mark," she said.

"Looks like it. But, auntie, aren't you going to let me see her?"

"I have no one staying with me, nephew."

"Aunt, it's not like you to tell fibs. I saw her."

"Then you have the advantage of me. I have not seen her."

"She is the most perfectly lovely child. Really, aunt, I only want to look at her. You know how an artist delights in beauty."

"I know. But you have made a mistake this time, Mark. Must I call in the servants to protest that I have no visitor of any kind at present?"

"Oh, forgive me, aunt! I must have mistaken the house. Really, if you had seen her you would not blame me for wanting another look!"

"It is all right," magnanimously. "And I may say that if I had a lovely child staying with me I would not be afraid to let you see her. Thank Heaven for that, Mark."

He went over to her and kissed her wrinkled forehead. For an instant his face was serious. "Yes, thank Heaven for that!" he said. At the door he paused. "Say, auntie, you've seen a lot of life in your day. Tell me, is there anything in—in that kind of thing?"

"I am not a mind reader, nephew."

"Well, I mean in seeing someone, you know, and knowing all at once that you never saw anyone just like them—her, I mean, and feeling——"

"I understand. Why, yes. There is probably something in it. It has happened to you once or twice already, hasn't it?"

"By Jove, no! Nothing like it. Girls"—with a comprehensive gesture—"there are so many girls. They're all alike. Except—auntie, I really thought I saw her come in here."

"You must have been mistaken, Mark."

When he had gone the old lady looked after him with a softened face. "Not a bit like his father!" she thought. "Not a bit, but a good lad. He will settle down some day. I wonder whom he thought he saw."

"Send in the reading woman now, Martha," she said aloud.

CHAPTER IX

LUNCHEON FOR TWO

THE "reading woman" followed the maid down the corridor with courageous mien. It would never do to give way to nervousness now that the goal was in sight. Only let her be brave for another few moments and success would be hers.

"What did you say your name was?" asked the maid.

"Christine Brown."

The maid opened the door. "Miss Brown to see you, ma'am," she announced, and to Christine, in a whisper, "Go right in. Never mind the dark. Her eyes aren't strong. Don't talk loud, it hurts her head."

"Don't stand there, come right in." The voice from the invalid's room was so robust that Christine jumped. "Don't bang the door! Gracious! I thought I asked you not to bang the door. Martha, my salts! Please come nearer, Miss Brown. Sit where I can see you!"

It was the invalid herself who spoke, and so amazing was the effect of so large a voice from so small a person, that Christine obeyed in bewildered silence. She had intended to be very acute and observing, but she found herself unable to observe anything save the odd figure in the invalid's chair. Indeed, Miss Torrance was enough to engage anyone's whole attention. She was

so little, so wizened, that her appearance was positively startling. And her voice! when she spoke Miss Torrance appeared to be all voice.

"Don't stare!" boomed the voice irritably. Christine dropped her eyes.

"If there is anything I dislike it is a person who stares," continued Miss Torrance, staring very hard herself. "Why, you are a perfect child! How old are you?"

"Nearly seventeen."

"Far too young! I didn't advertise for a baby. What is your mother thinking of?"

"I have no mother, Miss Torrance."

"I thought not. Dead, I suppose, or you would not be here. Well, I never judge from appearances. You may read a little from that book on the table, the green one. I am quite sure that you will not do. But I am always fair. I never form conclusions without good reason. Begin where you find the book-marker." The invalid closed her eyes with a resigned expression.

Christine picked up the book. She knew that she was a good reader, and the knowledge brought back some of her confidence. Her clear, low voice was very pleasant to hear.

"Not bad, not bad at all," admitted the invalid. "But I don't suppose you could keep it up. I am not pessimistic, but I always distrust good beginnings."

"Oh, I think I could keep it up," said Christine quickly. "Really, I do." As she leaned forward her face came fully into the light, looking so lovely in its young eagerness, that the invalid started involuntarily and put up her glasses.

"My dear!" she said in a different tone. "Did you meet a young man as you came in here?"

"No," said Christine truthfully.

"Did you *see* a young man?"

"No—yes. One got out of an automobile a little farther down the street. I think he had lost something."

"Was he tall, dark, and quite too good-looking for any useful purpose?"

"I'm afraid I did not notice," faltered Christine. She could see no reason for the questions, but the little old lady was evidently excited.

"Did he speak to you, my dear?"

"I think he said, 'By Jove,'" said the girl demurely.

"Um, very likely. Well, this is a nice state of affairs. Lost something, had he, the scamp! And no wonder he thought I was lying." She checked herself. Her sharp old eyes rested more kindly on the girl's wondering face, but her determination was immediately taken.

"All this is beside the point," she said briskly. "My dear, you read very well, but I am afraid that you would not suit me. I am a very cranky old woman, and you are too young to be patient. Don't protest. I believe in being fair and in giving people a chance, but I know that the young are never patient with the old. And I would always feel guilty if I kept you in this close room when you ought to be out in the sunshine. I inherit the Torrance conscience, and it is a great trouble to me."

There was a kindness in her voice which largely took the sting from the rejection. Christine felt an impulse of liking, and raising her eyes, said frankly, "I think I could be patient, Miss Torrance, but if it would worry you to have me, of course——"

The old lady nodded. She had noticed at once Christine's neat dress and good shoes, and decided that this was not a case of urgent need, so that "the troublesome Torrance conscience" could not accuse her of harshness.

"Then we will consider it settled," she said. "And if you will not mind a word of advice from an old woman, I would tell you to go home and try to be useful there. You are much too young and too pretty to work for yourself, unless it is absolutely necessary."

Christine flushed. "It is absolutely necessary," she said, rising. Then, proudly fearful that she might seem to appeal for pity, she added a quick, rather stiff "Good morning," and left the room.

The old lady watched the closing door ruefully. "Most unfortunate," she murmured. "But it would never have done. Martha," to the maid, "you could see it would never have done to have her here. Pretty? The child is lovely! Mark would have been wild over her in a week. What did you say her name was? Brown? Might just as well have been Smith. Do you know whom she looked like? She looked for all the world like my youngest sister, Mona. She was a belle when I was already *passé*. How I used to envy her. Adam simply adored her. He used to call her honey-bee on account of her hair. This child's hair is just like it. Poor Mona, she died very young. Likenesses are strange things!"

The maid smiled grimly. "Likenesses or no, she'll have some trouble getting anything respectable with that face," she remarked. "In her walk of life I always say that beauty is a drawback as often as not." She glanced complacently at her own prim features in the mirror. Her mistress, observing the glance, smiled.

"And what would you say Miss Brown's walk in life might be, Martha?"

The maid shook her head slowly. "Oh, she's got airs and graces enough! But you never can tell. Shopgirls are getting very dressy, these days, what with their false hair and all! And ladies don't go about looking for work."

"The child said it was absolutely necessary."

The maid's prim lips came together sharply. It was evident that she had her own opinion about what "the child" might have said.

Miss Torrance sighed. "Well, I could not have taken her. Though, if Mark hadn't come in I might have. I liked the child. She had a voice like music. It was most selfish of Mark, most inconsiderate! I wonder if he was going to call on Alice van Slyke when he saw her? It looks as if Adam were making rather a point of Alice. Well, it can't be helped. Martha, I'll see no more applicants to-day."

"There are three waiting, ma'am."

"Send them away. That girl has spoiled me for anything more ordinary. It would not be fair to hear them now, and I always try to be absolutely fair."

It was of this "fairness" of Miss Torrance that Christine was thinking as she walked cityward with a heavy heart. *Why* had she, who believed in being so fair, refused to give a trial to one so eminently fitted as Christine? On account of her youth? Christine had read in books that invalid ladies liked youth. In the proper order of things Miss Torrance ought to have engaged her at once. Soon she would have made herself indispensable; the old lady would have loved her like a daughter, and, finally, have decorously faded away, leaving Christine her blessing, and, incidentally, her

beautiful home and plenty of money ! Here Christine's sense of humour saved the situation. She laughed heartily, and laughter is a good clearing-house for gloom. After all, what was one check ? One must not expect to succeed the very first time. Pausing for a moment, she drew out the second newspaper clipping.

"WANTED.—Cheerful companion for lady living alone. No housework. Good wages."

This sounded promising. "I should think *she* would want someone young," mused Christine. "Young people are more cheerful. Probably all her people are dead. Poor thing, it must be awful to be lonely like that."

The address, this time, was in another part of the city, distant, but easily reached by car. Christine was much too innocent to know that the street mentioned was in a somewhat questionable quarter. She only knew that she had never been in that direction before, so that the sauce of novelty was added to the adventure. As the car whirled on she gave herself up once more to dreams. This lady to whom she was going was surely in great need. She pictured her in black, with a sad face. It was too bad that she lived so far from Brook Street. Christine peered out of the window of the car to find out just where she was, but the street was a strange one. As she did so she noticed a young man in a motor, whose face seemed vaguely familiar. The motor was going very slowly—for a motor. It seemed, indeed, to keep just abreast of the car ; but here the girl's interest was distracted by the crowing of a pretty baby on the opposite seat, and her eyes ceased to follow the slowly moving car.

At the corner of Hadly Street she alighted, and, after consulting her slip of paper for the proper number, she set off gaily in the direction indicated. It did not look like a pleasant street, yet the girl felt no dismay. She felt only sorry that a bereaved lady should be compelled to live in such an ugly part of the city.

But if her surroundings left Christine undisturbed, the same cannot be said of the young man in the motor-car. When he saw her turn into Hadly Street, blank dismay seized upon Mark Wareham. The car slowed irresolutely, turned, stopped entirely, and then started again with new decision. It, too, turned into Hadly Street.

When Mark had left his aunt's house he had fully believed that the old lady was not deceiving him. She had evidently no guest at present, and he must have been mistaken in thinking that the lady he sought for had gone in at her gate. On the other hand, there was the evidence of his eyes, and his eyes were not bad as eyes go. If she had not gone in there she had disappeared somewhere in that neighbourhood, and her disappearance had added the spice of mystery to an interest already keen enough.

The only thing to do was to wait, and Mark waited. The chauffeur he sent home, and, driving the car himself, he patrolled Amberley Avenue with such efficiency, that he soon saw Christine coming out—and out of his aunt's gate!

Had Aunt Miriam fibbed, after all?

He did not care to settle the question now. The main thing was not to lose sight of the lady a second time. Effacing himself as far as was possible in a big Panhard, he watched her take a slip of paper from her pocket, read it, and board a down-town car at the

corner. Evidently she was searching for an address; he would search, too, and the blame for such seemingly dishonourable action might be laid at the door of Aunt Miriam, who had made such procedure necessary.

Christine sat by the car window; once in a while she glanced out, but as she never seemed to notice him, his presence could not offend her; besides, a cat may look at a king.

Where was she going? As the better portions of the city were left behind he wondered more and more, and watched the unconscious face at the window with no little concern. When he saw her alight at Hadly Street he gasped with dismay. That lovely child—here!

Quite happy, and with no idea of causing distress to anyone, Christine walked on, looking carefully at the house numbers. The houses, she thought, were not nice-looking houses, but the one she sought looked rather nicer than the others. It seemed comfortable, and had a small garden. But it certainly did appear to be lonely. Christine wondered how it could look so lonely in the midst of a long city street, but long streets are very lonely sometimes—especially when the houses are so much alike. Christine thought that a lady living here would need a very cheerful companion, indeed. She felt her own spirits sink a little. Nevertheless, she rang the bell with resolute hand. As she did so an automobile passed down the street. After a slight delay the door was opened by an untidy maid.

"I have come in answer to this advertisement," said Christine, determined this time to have no misunderstanding. But this house had no side door, and the maid showed her in at once.

"I'll tell her," she said, eyeing Christine curiously. "Just sit down."

The room into which Christine was shown was evidently the parlour, and bore its state in life with dignity. It might have been its boast that no one could ever have mistaken it for anything but a parlour. It had a "suite," a piano, a palm, a polished table with poets nicely laid out in padded leather, and each wall displayed exactly two pictures hung at the same height and at regular intervals. Christine shivered. "But she can't possibly live in here!" she comforted herself, and, with a glance at the precise piles of music on the piano rack, "I don't believe she can play, either."

"No, I do not play," drawled a soft voice from the doorway. Christine turned with a start. A lady had come into the room—at first glance she seemed a very beautiful lady.

"I am Mrs. Wilkins," said the lady. "I saw you looking at the music and making deductions. It does not look like music which is often played, does it? But you see, it goes with the house."

"Oh, then it is a furnished house?"

The lady shrugged her pretty shoulders. "I hope you did not think that I furnished it! But it is really a perfect gem in a way. How does it strike you?"

"Very comfortable." The off-hand manner of the lady confused Christine.

"And prim—and respectable? It is very respectable, don't you think? That music, now—Mendelssohn's 'Songs Without Words,' are they not? Nothing could be more decorous. It is only the words of songs which are not respectable."

Christine laughed. The remark, to her girlish ears, sounded clever. Mrs. Wilkins sank into the rocking-

chair of the suite and arranged her floating draperies. Her face in the better light did not seem so attractive. It was hard; it was too pink and white. Christine thought that it looked "odd."

With the same unerring reading of her thoughts, the lady put up her handkerchief to her face. "Heavens! have I got too much on?" she asked interestedly. "The light was bad upstairs. I don't hold with overdoing it."

"What?" asked puzzled Christine.

Mrs. Wilkins tapped her fair cheek. "This! Now you—gracious, you're not 'done' at all!" Her glance grew keen. "I thought the maid said——"

"I came in answer to this." Christine held out the slip containing the advertisement. "I'm in need of a position with good wages, and I am very cheerful."

"You!" To the poor girl's embarrassment the lady began to laugh—pretty, silvery laughter. "You! Oh, this is rich. Why, my good girl, I didn't advertise for a child!"

"But I am not a child. I am sixteen, and I am very cheerful. Young people are the cheerfulest. You are young yourself, Mrs. Wilkins; I do hope you will let me try."

The strange lady's laughter subsided and her face grew suddenly grave. "I don't think you will do at all," she said abruptly.

"But why?" urged poor Christine.

The other's eyes began to twinkle.

"Well, for one reason, you know, I need someone to go with the parlour."

Christine looked round with a puzzled air.

"Very respectable," prompted the lady, "very stiff, very prim."

Christine smiled. "I am respectable," she declared, "and you remember you didn't say prim, you said 'cheerful.'"

"I meant prim. At least what I really meant was one who could be both cheerful and prim—upon different occasions."

"I don't quite understand."

"That's it exactly." Mrs. Wilkins' eyes crinkled up in the most enticing way when she laughed. "Sit down again and don't be cross with me. You see, Mr.—um—Wilkins is away most of the time and it is annoying to be here alone without anyone but a clumsy maid, and then, to a certain extent, one thinks of appearances."

"But," said puzzled Christine, "it is perfectly correct for a married lady to live alone."

"Oh, yes, certainly." Mrs. Wilkins played rather nervously with her many rings. "I suppose you haven't a mother?" she said without looking up.

"No, but I have two sisters who have never let me feel the want."

"Do they know you are here?" quickly.

Christine blushed. "No, it was to be quite a surprise."

"It would be," said the other dryly. "And now I think—there's the bell."

She broke off abruptly and listened as the girl went to the door. The parlour door was open and they both heard a pleasant man's voice say, "Good morning. Does Mrs. Alfred Smith live here?"

"No, she doesn't," said the girl shortly.

A slight pause, during which Christine racked her brains to remember where she had heard the voice before.

"Might I see the mistress of the house?" asked the man at the door ingratiatingly.

"She don't see no agents."

"But I have here——"

"She don't want it." The maid shut the door with a bang.

"Gracious!" said Mrs. Wilkins. "What a nice voice he had. Some of these agents—why, look, he has an automobile! Pianos, I guess. I wish we had asked him in, only"—she glanced uncertainly at the girl—"I don't think you ought to stay—I mean I mustn't detain you any longer. You wouldn't do for me, my dear."

Christine thought that she looked rather tired and sad as she said it, but there was decision in her tone. It seemed useless to insist, so, swallowing a lump of disappointment which seemed to leap into her throat, Christine held out her hand. The other did not seem to see it.

"Good-bye," she said. "Be sure to take the car at the corner."

The girl murmured an assent, but, indeed, she hardly heard the words. She was cruelly disappointed, the lump in her throat threatened to dissolve in tears, and she turned away from the house without noticing in what direction she was going. The brightness of the morning seemed dimmed somehow, for beside her own growing doubts and fears, she felt the burden of the tragedy of another, a tragedy which she did not understand, but which she could dimly feel. Absorbed in her thoughts she walked on aimlessly, a strange figure indeed in that haunted street. Many watched her with curious eyes, some slunk out of her way, but at last one man, bolder or more vile, spoke to her. She did not hear what he said, but looked up with a quick smile.

The look she met was something she had never seen, never dreamed of.

"If you're going this way, I'll go along with you," said the man more loudly this time. He placed his hand upon her arm. Christine shrank back with a startled cry, and next moment the man's leering face was knocked out of her foreground, and the man himself went spinning down the pavement under the force of a well-directed blow.

"Excuse me," said a pleasant voice, "I think that fellow was annoying you."

"Yes," said Christine. "He—he was." She looked up with frightened eyes into the face of the speaker. But the face seemed somehow familiar. It was a dark, strong face, and the voice was kind. She felt none of the fear and repulsion for him that she had felt for the other man, and she spoke to him as she might have spoken to Tommy. "He was horrid," she admitted with a shaky laugh.

"I came up just in time," said the young man, pointing to a big green automobile standing by the curb. "In fact, I was looking for you. My aunt, Miss Torrance, sent me after you. She would very much like to see you if you can spare her a little time."

Hope sprang up in Christine's eyes. "Oh, thank you," she said gratefully. "Has Miss Torrance changed her mind? I will go at once. Can you tell me the nearest way to the car?"

"It is here." He pointed smilingly to the motor by the curb. "Will not this car do? It is much quicker. If you will trust me to drive you."

The girl did not hesitate. She knew quite well that she could trust this young fellow who stood there so gravely before her. With a brief word of thanks she

stepped into the car. He followed her, and in a moment they were off.

"Oh, how *fast!*" gasped Christine.

The driver smiled. "I'll slow down presently. Let's get out of this first."

"Out of what?" asked Christine between bumps.

He looked at her sharply, and his face brightened. "Oh, out of these bad roads," he told her. "Now, this is better," as they turned into a broad and quiet avenue. "I can go more slowly here."

Christine, to whom the novel ride had restored her spirits, laughed. "Surely, it is an odd idea to go fast on bad roads and slow on good ones."

"Not at all. There is never any sense in lingering over unpleasant places, Miss—I think Aunt Miriam said that your name was Miss——"

"Brown," said Christine.

"Yes, of course, Miss Brown. I suppose you are wondering how I knew you, but the fact is I happened to see you go in to Miss Torrance's this morning."

"Why—and I saw you, too! I remember now. That is why I seemed to know your face. And your voice. You got out of this very motor. You had lost something, I think, and you said, 'By Jove!'"

"Did I, though?" Mark had the grace to blush.

"Did you find it?" asked Christine.

"What?"

"The thing you lost?"

"I don't know," stammered Mark. "I am still looking for it."

"Are you really very keen on going to my aunt's at once?" he asked her presently.

"Yes, of course I am. It is very important. You don't know how important."

"Then I am afraid you are going to be very vexed with me. The truth is, that I have you in this car under false pretences. I—I didn't have a message from Aunt Miriam."

"What?"

"No, I didn't. You see, I just wanted to get you away from—from any annoyance, and that seemed the quickest way of doing it. You did not know me, but you knew her, and if you knew she was my aunt it might be—like an introduction, you know. You see, it all just happened. I did see you at Aunt Miriam's, and so I knew you were a friend of hers, and when that rough had the impudence to speak to you I took the only way I knew of getting you away without disturbance. I hope you will forgive me."

Christine's face was turned away. The disappointment was so great that she could not have spoken had she wished. There was a horrible lump in her throat again.

"If you can't forgive me you might just as well say so," said Mark gloomily. Christine made an effort to swallow the lump.

"It isn't that. I'm sure you were very kind, but—well, it is a mistake all through, I'm afraid. I am not your aunt's friend. I called to apply for the position of lady's companion."

It was simply said, and with dignity. It was evident that Christine did not think any the less of herself for the fact she related. Mark felt himself blush brilliantly. Then, after a half glance at the lovely child-face so proudly turned away, he cleared the air with a sudden burst of laughter.

"You! a companion to Aunt Miriam! Suffering cats!"

"Why not, indeed?" Christine's face was still prim, but her voice gurgled.

"Why not? Oh, I don't know. Only it's tremendously funny! If you knew my aunt as well as I do you would laugh yourself. Aunt Miriam is really a corker, don't you know!"

"I thought her very nice, and when you said she had sent you I was so glad, because I thought she had changed her mind and was going to have me. It quite cheered me up. Mrs. Wilkins wouldn't take me, either, you see!"

"Mrs. Wilkins? Oh——" A sudden ray of light dawning. "Was it Mrs. Wilkins you called upon in Hadly Street?"

"Yes, but how did you know?"

"Well, I was just passing. I saw you go in—I——"

Christine turned around suddenly. "Oh, I know now where I heard your voice! You were the piano agent!"

The young man's confusion was so evident that she added quickly, "There's nothing to be ashamed of in being a piano agent."

Mark recovered himself. "No, certainly not—only—well, my family—Aunt Miriam, you know, especially, don't like it. I keep it dark."

Christine nodded. "I see. It is just what I was trying to do. I did not tell the girls a thing about my trying to find a place. They wouldn't like it, either, although I don't see why. Celia is in a shop herself."

"A shop?"

"Yes, but, of course, she is the head of a department, and it is the best store in the city, Angers and Son. But, like you, I felt that I wanted to do some—

thing for myself. One can't go on living on one's family for ever, can one?"

"No," said Mark weakly.

"You look queer," said Christine. "What's the matter?"

In the infinitesimal pause Mark Wareham made a notable decision.

"I'm hungry," he declared, "and you must be hungry too, and I have to take a run out into the country, not very far. It's a nice little place, where they serve good meals, and their piano is out of tune. I wonder if you couldn't come with me?"

"Oh, I'd love to, but I don't believe the girls would let me. I'm afraid I cannot go."

"Did you promise to be home for lunch?"

"No-o, I said I might have it down town."

"Well, why not come? You know who I am now, and I believe you would enjoy it. I have taken dozens of girls out to Haffey's for lunch. It's quite the thing."

Christine considered. She wanted to go very much, and she knew that Ada would not expect her home, nor did she think that she would grudge her the pleasure of the offered trip.

Being a Canadian girl, brought up in an absolutely free, though clean and healthy atmosphere, and under conditions which precluded eternal chaperonage, she would have had no hesitation about accepting the invitation under ordinary circumstances. Ordinary circumstances in this case would mean that she had met Mr. Wareham in the customary way, and that he was known to her sisters. On the other hand, she wanted very much to go, and her misgivings were purely artificial ones. In her heart she knew that there was nothing more proper and natural than that he should

ask her, and that she should go. Tommy would be furious, of course! But then, Tommy was often unnecessarily fussy!

Mark did not urge her, but it was not from want of eagerness. His longing to keep her with him, even for that short time, surprised himself. Had he ever felt like this about any of the many girls whose courteous escort he had been? He knew that he had not, and the new sensation was as keen as it was delicious. He would expose her to no comment by taking her to Haffey's. It was as he said, "quite the thing." They would be taken for an engaged couple, probably, but that did not matter. In the unlikely event of his meeting one of his own friends, there would be curiosity aroused, but he would know how to meet that.

He stole another glance at her face. It was serenely thoughtful. How lovely she was. Her hair, he had never seen hair like it! The curve of her faintly red lips; the droop of the white lids over the hazel eyes. Of what was she thinking? Would she let him know her, see her often, be her friend? He had known in that instant's pause which followed after she had told him who she was, and that her sister was a clerk in his own uncle's store, that the answers to these questions would tip the balance of his fate.

If she would give him a chance, let him know her better, he would take that chance and let the lesser things go. So strangely are we made, that Mark Wareham, who, as a very handsome eligible, had for years been the special pet of mammas and the favourite of their daughters without a turning of the proverbial hair, was now, at the glance of one golden-haired girl, calmly facing a probable giving up of his whole scheme of life and hesitating in the choice no longer than one might

hesitate between a pebble and a pearl. Mark knew well what ambitions Adam Torrance held for him. He knew his pride, the rather selfish pride which had prevented him from identifying his name with that of the great stores he owned. He knew how deep was his affection for himself, and how he would suffer should Mark disappoint him. He had no misleading hope that such a man would ever consent to the marriage of his heir with a girl in Christine's circumstances and with the name of "Brown." He sighed. It would certainly mean a breach with the governor!

"You must be very hungry," said Christine timidly, noticing the sigh. "And I will go with you. I suppose I ought not, but I don't feel that I ought not. So I'm going. I am enjoying it so much. I have always wanted to ride in a motor."

"Wanted to——?"

"Ride in a motor. Like this. I never have before. It is like flying. I think it must be awfully jolly to be an agent; though it would be still nicer to have a motor of one's own, wouldn't it?"

"You think so? Well, I don't know. In that case one would have to pay the bills."

"Don't you wish you owned this one?" asked Christine practically.

"No, I don't." As a matter of fact, this was true, for this car belonged to Mr. Torrance and was of a make which Mark himself disliked.

Christine merely thought the remark showed strong-mindedness, and looked at him with added respect. "Celia is like that," she confided. "She doesn't worry about what she can't have."

"Celia is the one in the store?"

"Yes, she has been there sixteen years. Ever since

I was born. She is very clever; when she isn't tired she makes more sales than all the rest of her department put together, and her eye is so good that she never makes a mistake in matching a shade. Ada says that perhaps Celia has a double share of eyesight, because, you know," sinking her voice, "Ada is blind."

"I did not know," said Mark gently. "Tell me about it."

So, as they flew along under the yellowing autumn trees, Christine told him about her home. Told him, indeed, far more than she knew, until he felt that he had known the three sisters all his life. Only of one thing Christine did not speak. She said nothing about their present troubles, nor why she had suddenly decided to seek work herself. Her innocent pride caused her to paint things brightly, and he saw only the pleasant if humble home at its best and happiest.

She told him, too, of her ventures that morning in quest of work, speaking with a quaint air as of one worker to another (for was he not an agent and piano tuner himself?), and he managed, without unduly frightening her, to get her to promise not to make any more efforts without the knowledge of her sisters. From what she had told him of them he felt sure that her morning's experience would not be repeated. For the rest, they were like a pair of children on a holiday. Christine learned to move the levers of the big machine, and they both laughed like babies at her first attempt with the steering wheel, and at the hideous screech of the horn, the valve of which was broken.

Neither of them ever forgot that drive. In after years a red leaf, the smell of ripe apples under a tree, a blue haze on the horizon of a sunny day, could bring it all back—as fresh and poignant as yesterday. At

the time, Christine was not conscious of observing anything, yet afterwards she knew each foot of the road. It all belonged to the ineffaceable things of life. It remained always cloudless, spotless, completely happy, a day hedged about and set apart from all other days by the miracle of first love.

Not that she dreamed that the miracle had happened ! She was conscious only of a new content and of a fresh wash of green and red upon the earth, a new blue in the sky. Nature had brightened up and shone resplendent.

They had lunched at the pretty gabled inn (a transformed farmhouse), in what once had been the farmhouse kitchen. It was pleasant there. The windows were long and low, and red leaves blew in at the open door. They ate and drank fare fit for gods, and forgot all about the piano which needed tuning. The old lady who waited, smiled and nodded.

"That lad has brought many a lass before," she told her grand-daughter, "but this day he's brought the only lass for him."

"I don't see how you can tell, granny," said the grand-daughter wistfully. The old lady shook her head. "When you're as old as me you'll know without telling," she said. But the girl only laughed and shrugged her dimpled shoulders. "Oh, granny, what good will it do me then !"

CHAPTER X

FATE THE FIDDLER

THERE is nothing in life quite so perplexing as the problem of its might have beens. We feel ourselves so free and we are so bound. We are like birds with strong wings and a limitless sky overhead. We say to ourselves we will fly this way and we will fly that way, and we beat the air cheerfully with our wings; but in reality our flight is determined by forces, against which our poor wings are as thistledown in a wind—"willy-nilly blowing." Fortunately, we do not dream of our own impotence. How we would beat ourselves to death against the invisible barriers of circumstance could we but know that they were there. But we walk as free men, defying fate. There is a story in a comic paper of a man who fell upon the street and was picked up dead. One physician said, learnedly, "heart disease." Another said "apoplexy," but the street urchin who saw the fall said "banana peel." We laugh at the story; we appreciate the discomfort of the grave physicians, but put fate in the place of the banana peel and we unveil a tragedy.

No one could have been more certain than Mark Wareham that he held his destiny in his own hands that afternoon when he left Christine at the door of the House of Windows. It was with the air of a man making his future that he asked her, timidly as lovers

do, if he might call sometime soon to meet her sisters; and undoubtedly Christine thought that all the inquiries of fate were answered by her low-voiced "Yes." Yet the determining factor in the lives of both of them was not Mark's request nor Christine's reply, but the apparently irrelevant fact that Martha (Miss Torrance's sour-faced maid) had eaten toasted cheese for supper the night before. This is easily seen, for if Martha had not eaten the cheese she would not have had dyspepsia, failing dyspepsia she would not have asked leave to take a walk. The rest follows naturally, for on the walk she saw Mark and Christine returning in the motor from that divine luncheon at the Haffey inn.

It all happened by what we contentedly call mere accident; but having happened the result was inevitable. Martha was shocked; she told herself that she was grieved, but how seldom do we feel real grief for the frailties of others. Martha might shake her head and sigh, but deep in her heart she felt a pleasurable excitement. Her estimate of the airs and graces of Christine had been right after all!

"There she goes!" said Martha's inner nature, "just as I said! That's what comes of her pretty face. Looks like hers is a snare to them as have them." With a warm sense of personal rectitude she turned her face toward home, arriving a good half hour earlier than usual, with a head that was quite cured.

"I tell you it could not have been her," declared Miss Torrance with a total disregard for the King's English. "Martha, you are an old gossip! Why, you saw for yourself that he did not even know her name this morning, and you tell me now that they were motoring together. The thing is absurd. Give me my salts!"

"It was her, right enough," said Martha. "She isn't one you'd be likely to mistake. Nor Mr. Mark, either, let alone the green car. Name or no name, there they were and no mistake about it. Laughing, too! I knew how it would be!"

"Silence! You know nothing about it. The girl is as fresh and innocent as a baby; and Mark—well, Mark is no baby, but she is safe with him. If he really had her in his car—you say it was a green car?"

"Yes, ma'am. The green car belonging to Mr. Torrance. The one that has the awful screech. I see Mr. Mark pressing the bulb to make the girl laugh at the queer noise."

"It is most curious. However, if he really had her in the car he must have—now that I think of it, it is just like Mark! Where are my salts? Don't stand gaping there! Get me paper and pen. If she was really in the car the case is serious—for Mark! Just like him, too, and Adam would never forgive him, never. 'Brown!' Wheel up my desk. I must see to this at once."

Sulkily the maid, who was mentally incapable of following the mistress's thought-gymnastics, brought the required articles. Her great news had not produced the effect she had intended. Great news seldom does. But for Mark and Christine the effect was quite all that fate desired. The brief note which the aroused Miss Torrance sent to her brother had all the destructive power of a well-directed thunderbolt. One does not need to be Jove in order to strike.

"MY DEAR ADAM" (wrote Miss Torrance in her sprawling hand),—"Can't you send Mark away? There is a lady in the case. Nice girl, but name of Brown! No time for any serious attraction as yet.

Now, take a fool's advice for once, and don't speak to Mark of it, but get him safely off at once. Don't ask me for details. I won't give them.—Affectionately,

“MIRIAM.”

A characteristic letter, a shrewd letter and kindly intended, but based upon the fatally wrong assumption that time is necessary for the forming of a serious attachment. Miss Torrance did not believe in love at first sight, and things which Miss Torrance did not believe in simply did not exist. It would have been quite useless, for instance, to quote the poets, because Miss Torrance would have said “Fudge!” and to say fudge to a poet is to extinguish him. It would have been equally useless to quote the philosophers, because Miss Torrance would have said, “Don't argue with me!” in a tone which would have left a philosopher as dumb as an oyster. While as for quoting the latest facts of psychology, that would indeed have been a labour lost, since Miss Torrance would have disposed of them out of hand by simply saying, “Don't tell me! I know.”

Since then, according to Miss Torrance, Mark could not possibly have fallen in love with Christine without knowing her longer, it is curious to note how his uncle's sudden request that he should go West came upon him with all the force of a blow. Yesterday he would have welcomed the chance. He liked travel, and there was nothing to make him wish to stay where he was. Alice Van Slyke was a nice girl, but, in spite of his uncle's hopes to the contrary, he could have left her without a regret. There are nice girls everywhere! Then it would be a real pleasure to do something—anything—for his uncle, who had really been such a jolly good

sort; and who knows but that he might get some hunting in the West? All these things would, yesterday, have sent him on his journey with a light heart. Yet to-night so unimportant were they that he did not even think of them, and the one thing which forced him to assent to his uncle's request was that sense of obligation and honour which fate plants deeply in all of us so that we may do her bidding when we especially do not want to.

Mr. Torrance looked keenly at Mark's perturbed face. "Something in what Miriam says," he thought. Aloud he said carelessly, "Nothing here to keep you, is there, Mark?"

"Nothing to weigh against your need of me, sir."

"Nothing definite with Miss Alice, I suppose?"

"No; and uncle, we may as well consider that done with. She doesn't care for me and I can never care for her. She is a nice little thing. I like her and respect her."

"That's enough," dryly. "The 'like and respect' stage is hopeless. I am sorry, but I would not try to force you to a marriage against your will."

Mark looked up eagerly, but the even voice went on. "On the other hand, I shall expect you not to marry against mine. There is no hurry, and you will not find me unfair. Bring me a lady whose name and position equals your own, and if you are happy I shall be. I say nothing about money. You will have enough."

Mark blushed hotly. In spite of the gratitude which he felt for his uncle, there were times when he hated the sense of dependence which great favour, unaccompanied by perfect love, always brings. To-night the chains were especially galling, and why? He could

not himself have told why, and having opened his lips to speak he shut them without having spoken. Mr. Torrance was wise enough not to notice his silence.

"What I want you to do," he went on, dismissing the more intimate subject with a wave of his hand, "is to bring me back some report of the timber limits which have come into my hands. You will say you know nothing about timber. I know that, of course. In Vancouver you will call upon James Macgregor who knows enough for two, and he will make all the necessary observations. You two will charter a tug, take what outfit is necessary, and go up the coast as far as Quathiaska Cove. There you will strike inland to the limits. I want an exhaustive report from Macgregor, and it may take some time——"

"But, uncle, if Mr. Macgregor is to do it all, why need I go?"

"Because I wish it. Your report will be, in its way, quite as valuable as Macgregor's. You will know little about the timber, but you can use your intelligence in a dozen different ways, and your opinions and observations of the country and its conditions will be of the greatest service to me. I have plans—well, it is too soon to speak of my plans yet, but I assure you that you are necessary to their proper carrying out."

"Very well," said Mark resignedly. "When do I start?"

"To-night, at ten."

"To-night!"

"The transcontinental leaves at ten. I have made your reservations. You see," smiling, "I felt sure I could count on you. Benson is now packing. I would advise your going straight out. You can do your sight-

seeing on the way back. There will be no hurry, none at all."

"Thanks. But I shall not loaf this time. I'll come right back. I don't suppose the whole trip will take very long, will it?"

"Impossible to say." Mr. Torrance's tone was final, for to himself he thought "Miriam was right—and I'm not sure that it isn't more serious than she thought. Who can the girl be? Brown!" he shuddered. "I mustn't keep you any longer, Mark," he added. "There may be a few things you would like to do."

Mark Wareham went up to his room thoughtfully. The whole thing had come so suddenly that all his world seemed out of plumb. This morning, coming down that stair, he had not seen Christine. The world had been empty—although he had not known it. Half an hour ago he had thought that he was going to see Christine to-morrow, and the world had been a wonderful place! Now he was going away, out of sight and reach of Christine and the world was empty again—only not empty in the same way. Mark did not pause to argue about the different ways of emptiness. Instead, he caught his foot in a rug and swore. How perverse things were! Yet nothing was clearer than that he could not fail his uncle in his need. Christine would never approve of his doing so. It did not strike him as at all strange that he should immediately place his action at the bar of Christine's approval. He sighed. If he could only see her before he went! His face lighted up; was it possible? Common sense told him that it was not possible. Her people would think him crazy. She herself might not like it. He kicked viciously at a strapped suit case.

"What time does that infernal train start, Benson?"

"Ten, sir. I think you will find everything all right, sir."

"Don't you believe it, Benson. Everything is all wrong. Something's slipped a cog somewhere. What time is it now?"

"Eight-thirty, sir."

"Well, get my things down to the station. I'm going out. I'll go on to the station from—where I'm going. So long."

Adam Torrance looked up quickly at the sudden reappearance of his nephew. "Going so soon, Mark?"

"Yes, a few things to attend to. I'll go right on to the station. Benson has attended to everything. No need for you to come to see me off, of course."

"Which means that he doesn't want me," thought the older man with something like a sigh, but he did not let the feeling show in his face. "Very well," he said. "Good-bye, my boy. Have a good time. Just use your eyes and tell me what you see. I'll write you at Vancouver." He held out his hand, which Mark shook heartily. Looking keenly into the frank young eyes his uncle could see no shadow there. Yet somehow, just at that moment, a strange psychological impulse prompted him to let the lad stay. For an instant he hesitated, an instant too long, for the impulse passed! Instead he gripped his hand harder. "Mark," he said, "you and I—we are not men who say much. But you understand? You know the position you hold in this house—the hopes I place in you. Do not disappoint me—my son!"

Mark bowed his head. "I'll do my best, sir," he said gravely. And they shook hands again.

Left alone, Adam Torrance looked around his pleasant library with a sigh. He considered himself a fair

man, and he was fair when the fairness did not clash too boldly with his own deep desires. He had an in-born conviction, scarcely recognised, but very potent, that things ought to arrange themselves according to his wishes. If they did not, he was inclined to use suasion. He hoped that he would not have to use suasion with Mark. He wished Miriam had been more explicit, but realised that it would do no good to ask for details. She had given her warning, more she would not do. Brown ! It sounded like the name of a girl who might work in the Stores !

He was angry with himself for thinking of the Stores. He did not wish to think of them, for they lay heavy on his conscience. Something was continually telling him, if he gave it the chance, that he had not been quite fair to the Stores. He had intended to be, years ago ; after that terrible thing had happened, the loss of his baby girl, and while the awful accusation of the letter was still fresh in his mind he had intended to do many things. But Edith, his wife, had been so broken in health. She had declared so pitifully that it would kill her to stay in the city where the child had been lost that, after a few half-hearted attempts, he had given it up and they had gone away. He had told himself, then, that he could not do otherwise, and probably he had been right. After his wife's death he had pleaded that he needed rest and change ; travel and yet more travel ; but, now that he was home at last, the pushed-aside, but never settled, problem stared him fully in the face.

Had he been a completely selfish man he would have ignored it ; brushed it away as thousands of rich men brush away unpleasant duties. But he could not do this. To a certain extent he could justify his neglect,

but when such justification failed he became actively uncomfortable.

"Now that Mark is off my mind, I'll have to look into things," he thought. "I'll never have a moment's peace until I do. Mark would have been a help, but I am glad he has gone. Miriam knew what she was talking about. Lucky I happened to have those timber limits. I'll write to Macgregor to keep him busy till I give the word. If Miriam would tell me who the girl is—only she won't—I might be able to make it up to her." But the little voice, which tells all of us a bit of truth now and again, said plainly, "You know that you could not make it up to her—if she cared." "Nonsense," he told the voice irritably. "This girl is nothing to me, and Mark—Mark is all I have."

Suddenly, for no obvious reason, a strange despondency came upon him. The immediate present seemed to slip out of focus, leaving him, a startled entity, in the vast outside of things. He felt, as he had felt once before in that room when he had given up the search for the child who would never be found, a sense of loss, profound and illimitable!

Then the familiar things rushed back, he got his grip again. But with a difference. The impulse to call Mark back was irresistible. He rang the bell sharply. "Send Benson to me!"

"Benson has left for the station, sir. Mr. Mark——"

"What is the time?"

"Ten-twenty, sir."

"The train has gone?"

"At ten, sir."

He turned back into the library. After all, it had been a foolish impulse.

CHAPTER XI

A LETTER TO POST

WHEN Mark Wareham closed the door of his uncle's house behind him he had no clear purpose in his mind. He had decided that he could not, in decency, call upon Christine; and yet it seemed intolerable to spend his small remaining time at a distance from her. It would do no harm, at least, to walk in the direction of her home. It was a long walk and the fresh air would enable him to think. Over and over again he wondered at the chance which caused his uncle to need him at this particular time. It seemed such a blind blundering of fate, but, not knowing anything about the toasted cheese eaten by Martha, the real reason of his misfortune did not for a moment occur to him. Again and again he pictured the morrow which was already among the "might have beens," and with each succeeding picture the present seemed more unendurable. It seemed as if he could not go without something, some word, some look even, which would hold a promise for the future; and as his will, already in the grip of one of the most elemental of human passions, grew more and more defiant, his reason ceased to remonstrate and it did not seem so impossible to see Christine, after all. At least it would be quite proper to try to see her. He might not succeed, but, to go across the continent without trying would surely be the height of foolishness. He

looked at his watch—not much time left, and it was a long way to Brook Street! Why need he walk? One could get plenty of fresh air on a car and be able to think all the better for sitting still. On fire with impatience he swung himself upon the first car that came along. It was the wrong one and he would have to change cars, but anything seemed better than a moment of waiting.

Why had Aunt Miriam fibbed about Christine? Stay, perhaps she had not fibbed. It was possible that Christine had been waiting for her interview while Miss Torrance talked to him. A simple and adequate explanation. An explanation also of why Miss Torrance, after seeing Christine, had declined to give her a trial as companion. He almost hated Aunt Miriam!

How slowly the car crawled! At the point of transfer an old lady of more than comfortable proportions got wedged in the doorway, and when extricated had succeeded in making Mark miss his car. Usually the most considerate and good-humoured of men, he now consigned all old ladies to a place not at all suited to them. There was one spot where the car switched also and a place where it slowed down because of an open sewer, and once the trolley came off! But Brook Street was reached at last; a more cheerful Brook Street at night, losing some of its sordidness in the show of lighted windows and the hum of talk. To Mark, it was a street apart, not subject to the laws of other streets. Love had passed that way.

There were many lights in the House of Windows. It seemed quite gay, for many of the blinds were but half drawn and lamplight hides as much as it discloses. Mark walked past the open door. He knew that the sisters' rooms opened to the side, above the garden,

and it was his fancy to see if he could pick them out. Afterwards he was inclined to take great credit to himself for his perspicacity, though indeed one only needed eyes to see the difference. For instance, the blinds of the Misses Brown hung straight and did not curl up at the edges. The windows of the Misses Brown were all open, and the curtains showed a dainty white, undisfigured by holes or dangling ornaments. The light, too, was different, clearer and more subdued.

As Mark stood gazing, someone moved into the lighted square of window—a girl's slim figure. Mark felt his heart leap and then fall like lead, for the figure was now joined by another, a man's figure, short and broad-shouldered. They leaned together over the window-sill. The sight was like tinder to the torch of Mark's awakening love. In a moment passion was ablaze. His journey, his uncle's need, every other consideration seemed futile beside the necessity of knowing who it was who stood in the window beside the figure of the square-shouldered man. The last of his diffidence vanished like a puff of smoke, and he strode in at the door of the House of Windows very much as a cave-man might have entered the home of his chosen mate. The impetus carried him up a full flight, and then, as no one opposed him, reason managed to get in a word. The acquired niceties of civilisation strove with the primitive instinct and he paused, ashamed.

What right had he?

Above, a door opened and closed; someone was coming down the stairs. He must go on, he could not turn back now—

"You!" said Christine.

She stood a few steps above him, the dim light shining behind her hair, her face in shadow. There

was a tiny pause that seemed endless, and then, with a woman's quick recovery, "How do you do?" said the girl coolly, "I am going down to post a letter." Her tone implied that he should draw aside to let her pass.

Now was the cave-man's chance. They were alone upon the stairs. Let him but assert himself and she must hear him. All he had to do was to hold his ground and speak. But something had happened. At the sight of her, at the sound of her voice, all Mark's love-born confidence, his fever to be doing, was merged in a calamitous timidity; of all the things which he wanted to do, he found he could do nothing. Meekly he stepped aside, raising his hat without a word, to let her pass.

With dignified deliberation, Christine came down the few remaining steps and passed him on the landing. She even went two steps down the other flight, then she hesitated, turned, and flashing him a look in which dignity vainly strove with mischief, she asked, "Were you—going somewhere?"

"Yes," said Mark. "I am going to Vancouver."

"Oh!" said Christine.

"I was coming to say good-bye."

"Oh!" said Christine again.

Mark was recovering his nerve. Time was flying. He must make the most of the few moments left.

"May I come with you to post the letter?" he asked gravely.

"Yes," said Christine. It was she now who seemed to have nothing to say. They walked down the stairs in silence. Christine forgot to be vexed with him for coming so soon. Mark forgot that he had expected her to be vexed. There are times when little things take second place.

"I have to go to-night, at ten," said Mark, when they were out in the cool dusk. Instinctively they turned into the quieter way—not the way to the letter-box! "I could not go without seeing you again. I know that I—that we——" he floundered, and Christine seemed not able to help him. "I mean, I know that we have known each other only a day. But it doesn't seem possible. I've often read in books about people feeling that they have always known other people. Till now, I thought it was rot. Yet when I saw you going in to my aunt's I knew you at once; not your name or anything about you, but just you. Did you feel anything like that?"

"No-o," said Christine thoughtfully. "Not like that. But," smiling shyly, "I seem to know you very well now. Otherwise," with sudden primness, "I wouldn't have gone to lunch with you or be walking with you now."

"Well, you see, it is the same thing, only different. It means that you and I were meant to be——"

"Friends? Do you think so?"

"And now that I have to go away and do not know just when I shall be back, I wanted to tell you myself and ask you to——" again that overpowering shyness seized him and turned a much bolder request into "to let me write to you."

Christine gave him a girl's frank look—a look that may have meant just anything.

"You may if you wish," she said simply.

"And you won't forget me? You promise——"

"Christine!" said a stern voice behind them.

Christine turned. "Oh, Tommy, you startled me! What is the matter? Is anyone ill?"

"I do not know your friend," said Tommy icily.

"Oh, let me introduce you. Mr. Wareham, Mr. Burns." Mark bowed curtly. He recognised the man with the square shoulders whom he had seen at the window.

"Gracious!" said Christine sweetly, "I thought I left you talking about the garden with Ada?"

"Ada thought you had simply gone down to post a letter."

"So I did. But not simply. Here is the letter-box now."

"It is the fire-box," said Tommy grimly.

"So it is—how funny!" This time Christine had the grace to blush. "Where is the old letter box, anyway?" she asked pettishly.

"Where it always is. Two blocks farther down the other way." Tommy's tone was the last thing in irony.

"In that case," interposed Mark politely, "perhaps Miss Brown will entrust her letter to me. I shall pass the box on the way to the station. And I must run. My train is due at ten sharp."

Christine held out the letter to him, turning her back upon the aggrieved Tommy.

"Yes, you must go," she said, placing her free hand in his. "Good-bye, and good luck."

He held her hand and the touch of it was more powerful than the frowns of a thousand Tommys. Yet for her sake he restrained himself. "You did not answer my last question," he reminded her. It was his last chance.

Christine blushed divinely. "Didn't I? Well, then, I promise." An answer sufficiently obscure to Tommy, but which seemed to satisfy Mark entirely. "Not good-bye, then," he said, "but *auf wiedersehen*."

"What's that?" demanded the angry Tommy.

"German," said Christine, placidly.

"Well, I'll be——"

"I don't doubt it," she turned to him now, her lovely face white and mutinous.

"Well? What do you mean by it?" she asked sharply.

"What?"

"I say, what do you mean by it? Why are you spying on me? What right have you? I tell you I'm tired of it. I won't have it! Oh, Tommy, you're a pig! I hate you." She put up her hands and began to cry softly in the darkness.

"Christine!" Tommy's horror was unfeigned. "Oh, Christine!"

"Go away. I don't like you. If you hadn't been here he might—have——" she sobbed incoherently.

"Yes, I think he might have," said Tommy with cold fierceness; "and now I want to know who he is and how you came to be walking here with him?"

"You have no right," repeated Christine sulkily, but nevertheless she told him. It all came out, about her attempt to get a position, about Aunt Miriam, about Mrs. Wilkins, about the luncheon, and about the going to Vancouver.

When she had finished Tommy drew a long breath and said, "Thank God."

"What for?" asked Christine sharply. "Because he is going away, I suppose."

"No, not that," said Tommy gently. "You don't understand, Christine. You gave me a fright, but it's all right now. Stop crying, dear. Did he—er—ask leave to write to you?"

"Yes, he did."

"And did you—but I see you did. Will you read the letters to—to Ada, Christine?"

"Parts—perhaps," said Christine naïvely.

In spite of himself Tommy laughed. "Oh, Christine, and yesterday you were a child!"

"That's just it, Tommy," said the girl slowly. "I was a child—yesterday."

He patted her hand tenderly. "Don't fret. We all have to grow up sometime—why are you looking behind you? What is the matter?"

"Nothing; only I thought I saw that old woman again."

"What old woman?"

"An old woman I saw this morning. I've seen her before sometimes. A horrid old thing with red eyes. Sometimes I have a feeling as if she was watching me. Look behind quickly. I think she is there now."

Tommy, much amazed, turned sharply and thought he saw someone; but the impression was so indistinct that he could not say whether or not it was but a shadow of the night.

"There is no one there; what nonsense, my dear girl!"

"Yes, I suppose so. She can't be really watching me. But I see her often. A most dreadful woman! And I am nervous to-night, Tommy——"

"Yes?"

"You don't really think that I—that he——"

"No. I think it was all natural and right enough. But you must not think of it too much, Christine. Remember, you have only seen him twice! He is a piano-tuner, you say?"

"Yes, but it is a good business. He said so."

Tommy smiled in the dark. "I expect it is. But

his name was one of the things which startled me. 'Wareham,' you know, is the name of the young fellow who is Mr. Torrance's nephew. A gay young fellow, if tales are to be believed, and engaged to Miss Alice van Slyke. For one awful moment I thought it might be he."

"Well, it isn't," said Christine cheerfully. They had now reached the house door. "Is my face all right? Celia mustn't be worried."

Tommy looked long at her flushed cheeks and happy eyes.

"It looks—different," he said a little sadly.

Christine rubbed her cheeks vigorously with her handkerchief. "Now?"

"I think it is a difference that you can't wipe off, Christine!"

He smiled at her blush, but as she sprang away from him up the stairs, he watched her with a sigh.

"Little Christine, too!" he thought. "How old we must be getting!"

The moon had risen and was shining on the blind girl's garden. In its light the tin cans shone like white lilies. An intolerable pain shook the commonplace heart of commonplace Tommy Burns!

CHAPTER XII

THE SHADOW OF THE STORES

CHRISTINE sprang up the stairs two steps at a time. It was an accomplishment which dated from her extreme youth and one which lately had been discarded in favour of a more ladylike progress, but this morning Christine was in a hurry. She burst like a young and frisky whirlwind into the room where the blind girl sat, and Ada had scarcely time to hide some knitting under her apron before she was lifted bodily from her chair in the whirlwind's strong young arms.

"I've done it!" said Christine, setting her back with a gentle thump. "Let's celebrate!"

The blind girl's face turned to her with bewildered questioning.

"I've got a place, a position, a job, a 'sit'! I'm an independent working person. Votes for women!"

"Christine!"

"Yes, I know. I'm excited, but that will wear off. The fact will remain. I start work at 8 o'clock to-morrow morning."

"Oh, Christine."

"Now, Ada, be sensible. You know and I know that I had to do it. I will admit that if we had plenty of money I wouldn't want to work—this way. I suppose I would want to do something, sometime, but I'd

have a good time first. Go to the University, you know, and do all the usual things. But as I cannot, I am quite resigned to my prospects. There isn't anything dreadful or pathetic in a strong girl of nearly seventeen earning her own living."

"I wish it could be avoided, dear. You do not know just what you are talking about, Christine."

"Yes, I do. I understand the three salient facts, anyway. I need to work, I can work, and I am going to work." She laid her hat aside, and sitting down in her favourite position rested her yellow head on the blind girl's lap.

"You must help me to reconcile Celia," she said coaxingly. "For the dreadful thing is that I am going into the Stores. Mr. Flynn got me taken on. Mrs. Flynn said he had to. She thinks I am doing a very sensible thing."

"The Stores?" echoed Ada. "Oh, Christine—Celia!"

"Yes, I know Celia will fret, but you must help me to win her over. It need not last. Something is sure to turn up, and when it does I shall be, like Mr. Micawber, on the spot! Don't you think it is foolish to make a trouble of the inevitable? I believe I am a born fatalist. Have you noticed it?"

Ada smiled. "I can't say that I have. Aren't you rather young to be anything so serious for awhile yet? All your experiences are ahead of you, and I suppose our blundering efforts to save you from them must seem rather amusing to a looker-on. All the same, I grudge your growing up. I have always thought of you as a child. But this last week you are different. I have been wondering——"

"How I knew about things? Well, I'll confess. I

heard you and Celia talking when you thought I was asleep."

"I guessed that. But it is about something else that I have been wondering. The difference in you has not been caused by what you heard that night. There must be something else."

Christine felt her face grow crimson.

"What else could there be?" she laughed.

"I don't know. But there is something. Last week you were a child, now you have grown up. I wish I could see you, Christine," wistfully, "there may be something in your face."

The girl sat up quickly. "What could there be, dear? It is just that I am getting older. I have been growing up for some time, only you and Celia have not noticed it. You have been such darling sisters; no one could have had a happier girlhood, but now you will make me miserable if you do not let me help. Celia has worked in a store since I was a baby. Why should I be thought better than she? And Celia must have a rest. She is tired out. Of course, I will not get more than half of Celia's salary, but we can get on somehow. There is something left, isn't there?"

"A very little; but I think we can manage. I have a surprise, too. Look." With a shy smile she drew from under her apron a soft mass of fine white wool. "It is a shawl," proudly. "There is one finished in the lower drawer of my dresser, and I can sell as many as I can make to the wool-store. The profit is not much, but it will help. Oh, Christine, just think of me being able to help!"

Christine kissed her. She could not speak for a moment, but Ada went happily on.

"The little Icelandic woman who lives in the back

suite on the first floor taught me. It is a very old pattern, so old that it is quite new again. Her great grandmother used to make them. Christine, if you only knew the hours and hours she has spent teaching me! People are so awfully kind. I took a long while to learn, although, when you and Celia were away, I practised and practised every spare moment. Celia nearly caught me once or twice, but never quite. No one knows I can do it, except Tommy!"

"You told Tommy?" said Christine in surprise.

"Yes. Someone had to get the wool and arrange for the store to buy the shawls and—and everything."

"Oh, and Tommy did that?"

"Yes, and he is so pleased. He thinks they are lovely. You know Tommy always understands me, and he knew how I longed to do something to help. He says he feels like that himself, only in his case it's hopeless because Celia won't let him do anything. Poor Tommy, he has been so faithful to Celia for so many years; ever since that night that you—I mean, ever since you were a baby. I don't suppose he is likely to change now."

Christine looked at her unconscious face curiously. To herself she was saying that she didn't quite understand Ada. She, Christine, felt sure that she would know if a man loved her.

"You are blushing!" said Ada suddenly. She was often uncannily conscious of things of which the blind are supposed to be ignorant.

"I am always doing it. I think I must have a cold," said Christine. She got up quickly and busied herself in laying the cloth on the round table. "I think I'll make pancakes to-night for supper," she went on reflectively. "I'll fry them in butter for a celebration!"

I wonder if Tommy will write me a poem? 'To a Young Lady Upon Securing Work' would be a proper title. He could make it very touching. Really, Ada, I'm nervous about telling Celia! She has not been like herself for these three weeks. Her eyes are so hard and bright, and her lips look so drawn and thin. She is stern, too. Celia never used to be stern."

"Does she look like that?" asked the blind girl anxiously. "I am afraid she is worrying more than we know."

"Well, she has to stop it!" Christine broke an egg into a bowl with an emphatic hand. "Ada, was there—where's the egg-beater?—was there any mail to-day?"

"Any bills, you mean? Yes, there is one. It felt rather big. I put it away so that Celia might not see it until she has had her supper. It's on the mantel, behind the clock."

Christine bent over her egg, beating vigorously. Lucky for her, now, that the blind girl was not near enough to sense the furious rush of colour which crimsoned even her slim white neck. He had written! She did not need to look at the envelope to know.

"Can't you find it?" asked Ada innocently.

"In a moment." Never was egg so well beaten before! What should she tell Ada? If she said that the letter was not for Celia but for her, the secret would be out. Celia would never rest until she knew who the mysterious correspondent might be. And Christine did not want to tell, she could not tell—yet. If she said nothing, Ada would conclude that it was for Celia and after supper would speak to her about it. She might say it was only a circular and pretend to burn it. That would be lying, and Christine naturally hated a lie.

Slowly she reached for the letter behind the clock. Perhaps it really was a circular! It felt like it. She was afraid, almost, to look at the other side! She turned it at last with a sudden flip: "Miss Christine Brown." Yes, it was for her. A big, strong handwriting—a writing she had never seen before and which she knew instantly.

"If it is Jones's bill, perhaps you had better open it," suggested Ada.

"It isn't Jones's bill. It's—it's a circular!"

She had told the lie without flinching! Her face grew hot. What would he think of her if he knew she could tell a lie like that? She crushed the letter into her pocket.

The blind girl sighed with relief. "That's good," she said. "I was afraid it might worry Celia. We ought to keep all worry from her just now if we can."

"Yes, we ought." Already the lie seemed more than justified. Christine mixed the flour with the egg with the sense of a crisis past. Perhaps lies were like other things—relative. Doctors often tell lies to patients—for their good. So it could not be altogether wrong, and there were times——

"Ada," she said suddenly, "what would happen if everybody always told the truth?"

"Why, I don't know. The millennium, probably."

"Would it? Think now?"

"Well," smiling, "I'm not so sure either. Truth is unpleasant sometimes. Perhaps we are not meant to tell all of it. But I suppose there is a difference between not telling the truth and telling what isn't the truth."

"Oh, how profound! But if it were for a person's good?"

"One would have to decide that for oneself. I re-

member once when you were delirious with measles you thought you saw a white cat sitting on the chair. Celia had to declare that she saw it, too, and I had to feel it and nurse it in my lap—for your good!" She laughed reminiscently.

Christine's letter did not seem such a weight in her pocket now, and the pancakes were ready for the pan. Ada's quick ear had already caught Celia's step on the stairs. Quietly she slipped the knitting into the table drawer. Christine watched the concealment with a laugh.

"Pancakes!" said Celia cheerily as she opened the door. "And butter! It smells nice—if we can only forget how much butter is a pound. Christine, don't you think that the bacon-dripping——"

"This is a celebration!" said Christine hastily. "Something nice has happened. We'll tell you after you've had supper."

"If it's nice, why not tell me now?"

"Ask me no more. There's a reason for my madness!" Christine's voice was light, but her quick eyes had not missed the weariness in Celia's face.

Celia, indeed, in spite of her forced cheeriness, was more than ordinarily exhausted. She did not know why; she told herself fiercely that there was no reason for it, but at heart she knew that every day was bringing her nearer to the last of her strength. She fought well, but fighting is a privilege of the strong: still, she was not beaten yet. She tried hard to eat the tempting cakes, to drink her tea and to take an interest in Christine's chatter.

"I shan't tell you the surprise at all if you don't eat," declared Christine.

Celia murmured something about having had a big lunch.

"What did you have?" questioned Christine severely.

Celia was understood to say that she couldn't remember. "But really," she declared, "I am not hungry. Ada, was there any mail?"

"Nothing but a circular, dear. Christine burned it."

(Christine was certainly very much flushed—probably it was cooking pancakes.)

"A circular? What was it, Christine?"

"Oh, what?" with a nervous start. "The circular? I don't know—er—pianos, I think."

"Pianos? How strange to send piano circulars to Brook Street. You ought not to bend so near the fire, dear. Your face is crimson."

"Christine has a cold," said Ada. "Perhaps she is feverish."

Tired as she was, Celia immediately rose and felt the girl's forehead with an anxious hand.

"She has a little fever, I think," she answered in a worried voice. "Did you get your feet——"

"No. Really, Celia, it isn't fever. It is the heat from the stove. That and feeling worried about what I have to tell you. Are you sure you can't eat any more? Well, then, it is just this—that I've got work. I am going to begin to-morrow."

For a moment there was silence. Celia's face settled into hard lines. She did not look at Christine.

"Where?" she asked briefly, coldly.

Christine was frightened. She glanced at Ada appealingly, and the blind girl felt the look.

"Celia," she said gently, "perhaps Christine is right. It is only for a time. Things will be better soon. And

she will take no harm. You have done it all so long, dear, surely you can let us help you now?"

Celia, usually as wax in Ada's hands, did not seem to hear her.

"Where are you going?" she asked Christine again.

"With you," said the girl. "I've got a place at the Stores."

Celia drew a sharp breath. Then she laughed, a laugh such as they had never dreamed could come from Celia, bitter, hard. She looked at Christine, a glance which swept her from head to foot. "A shop-girl!" she said. "You!"

Christine pushed her plate aside. "Why not?" she asked quietly.

"I forbid it. That's all. If you must work, wait until you find something else. You have youth, health, beauty and courage. That is what the Stores want. They'll take it all, day by day, week by week, year by year, they'll take it all! First your youth, then your health, and then your beauty—or, no, they take your courage first I think, so that you have none when you want to break away. They fill you so full of the fear of life that you daren't let go. Don't I know it! And then when these are gone they take what's left and"—she looked around in a frightened way—"I don't know just what they do with what's left," she said in a half whisper.

"Celia," said Christine, "you are not well. You are not yourself."

"Yes, I am quite myself. I see very clearly. You have heard me speak of Alma Stone? She worked beside me for years. She was young and pretty—not half as pretty as you. She stood it a long time, and then she broke away. She had still some good

looks, and a little courage left. She said she was going to make a bid for freedom! To-day I heard what happened to her."

"What was it?" asked the girl interestedly.

Celia laughed again. "You—you don't even know!" she said, "and you won't if I can help it. Now listen, Christine, you must give up this idea. It is true that I do not see any prospect of your going back to school just at once, but that is a different matter. You must promise me——"

"But, Celia, dear, I have tried so many different things, uselessly——"

"I know, but there must be something. If you enter the Stores now, it will break my heart. All these years that I have worked there, seeing my youth and strength going from me, I have kept my heart warm with the thought that it would save you from a like fate. The reason is stronger than you know. Don't let me feel now that it has all been in vain, and that the Stores have got you too. It isn't necessary. I have not given out yet."

Christine rose and stood beside her, smoothing her still soft and plentiful hair with gentle hands.

"Celia," she said, "I promise. If it isn't necessary I will not go. But if it is necessary you must promise not to feel like that. You're looking at it wrongly. Indeed you are. You have done for me more than a mother could do. You have been mother and sister too. I will obey you. But if your health demands a rest and I can help in no other way, you must let me help in the only way I can. Is it a bargain?"

Celia, relieved of the fear and despair into which Christine's proposal had plunged her, smiled happily. She felt stronger. She was sure that she could get

along until something else was found. And the love and reverence in the girl's eyes made her glow with happiness. "It is a bargain," she said and kissed her.

Later, Tommy came in. He had a new poem for Celia, a new book for Christine, and some late flowers for Ada. "Like those by the east wall in the garden," he told her unblushingly. The room brightened wonderfully under the influence of his kindly chatter.

But suddenly in the midst of a laugh Celia caught her hand to her side, gasped, and fainted!

The doctor, hurried in by an excited Tommy, found her still unconscious and very white upon the bed.

"A bad breakdown," he said after a quick examination. "She must not move for weeks. Complete quiet, nourishing food, absolute rest of body and mind."

"We can give her rest of body," said Christine, "but what about her mind? She is sure to worry because she does not want me to work, and now I must."

The doctor looked at her, standing there straight and young with her lovely face and fearless eyes. "I don't wonder!" he said involuntarily. "But—well, do the best you can. And for awhile, at least, you will have no trouble. She is too weak to worry. She may not ask a single question." He glanced at Tommy curiously. "Your sisters?" he asked courteously.

"No," said Tommy shortly.

"Well, don't worry. I think she will pull through."

Relieved of his worst anxiety, Tommy's eyes wandered from the bed to where Ada stood listening. The doctor caught their expression, and smiled understandingly.

"Same old triangle!" he mused, drawing on his

gloves. As he turned to go he looked very closely at Christine and, on sudden impulse, drew Tommy aside.

"You are not really going to let that child go into a store, are you?" he asked curiously. "Why, she has a face—whew! It will be a risk."

"What can one do?" asked Tommy miserably.

"That's so. But—I'll tell you, I need someone in my office just now. Clerical work, appointments, etc. How would that do, eh?"

Tommy looked at the man keenly. He had a handsome face, but it was set with the unmistakable seal of fast living. Something in the eyes seemed greedy, repulsive. The look he cast at Christine brought the blood into Tommy's face.

"I don't think it would do at all," he said, shortly.

The doctor laughed. The greedy light in his eyes faded out. He was cold again, professional.

"No? Well, probably you are right," he agreed, and bowing, took his leave.

Tommy came slowly back into the inner room. Celia lay in a semi-stupor with Ada crying quietly beside her. But Christine stood erect, her hand resting upon the foot of the bed.

"Well, that is over!" she said. "To-morrow I go to work!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE STORES AT LAST

THE theory of coincidence to which we refer so many of the curious happenings of life will explain, perhaps, the fact that one week after Christine entered the Stores the semi-annual ribbon sale began. It was Christine's first experience of a sale's true inwardness, and the marvels which she noted were not dissimilar to those same marvels observed by Celia in the same place sixteen years before. Save for the complete change of personnel and a few minor differences, the scenes might well have been counterparts of each other. In the ribbons themselves the main distinguishing feature seemed to be that, whereas plaids had been the fashion then, it was now stripes which were most in evidence. The fashion in hairdressing had also changed, and the young ladies behind the counters, who in Celia's day had been content with neatly coiled or braided tresses, were now resplendent in towering structures which held the eye with the fascination of the wonderful. It was all simple enough to one who understood the mysteries of rats and buns and turbans and puffs and curls, but to the uninitiated the result was little short of miraculous, for even supposing that Nature, in lavish mood, had supplied such hair—how did they get it to stick on? The costuming also had changed, for now, instead of a medley of colours, the clerks were

uniformly dressed in black; black of all degrees of blackness, in all stages of newness and oldness, and of all kinds of materials and grades of quality, but still, as far as the colour scheme was concerned, blackness everywhere. The uses of this funereal rule were just now becoming apparent to Christine, who was watching one of her fellow-clerks.

"Yes, madam," the girl was saying, "this is a true yellow." She tossed the end of a ribbon over her black sleeve. "This other is more of the Tuscan shade. The difference"—throwing the end of the second ribbon beside the first—"is quite discernible against the black."

"I wish to goodness that customer would go and let Miss Blake get a chance to straighten up," whispered one of the other clerks to Christine, "but, you'll see, she'll stay till the bell rings. Miss Blake has been ten minutes behind the rest of us all the week. That's what it means to have obliging manners! That woman doesn't intend to buy anything, anyway."

"So many don't," said Christine. "I wonder why?"

"One of three reasons," said the other, "they don't know what they want, or they don't really want it, or they want it and can't get it—— Are you tired, Miss Brown?"

"No," said Christine; but, as she straightened up, an involuntary sigh betrayed the effort.

"Oh no! of course not!" gibed the other, with sympathetic irony.

"It's my back," explained Christine. "I never knew I had a back before, and now it's difficult to know anything else. To-day has been the worst yet."

The girl nodded. "Sales are fierce," she admitted. "Did you ever see anything like that scramble for the

sash ribbons at nine o'clock? One woman had on a chiffon scarf which must have cost six dollars anyway. In the scrimmage it was torn to pieces—but she got the twenty-cent ribbon she wanted! And they say we must be polite to them! At noon to-day three women had hold of the same piece. They fought for it like dogs for a bone. Polite? You might as well try to be polite to a lot of——”

“Oh, be careful,” said Christine, “somebody might hear.”

The other girl, who was a brunette of a coarse but handsome type, tossed her overlaid head. “Don’t care if they do,” she declared; “I’m going to get out of here next week.”

Christine sighed.

“If you take my advice, you’ll get out of it too. You’ve got a weak back. Every new girl’s back is sore at first, but it wears off. Yours is getting worse. You won’t stand this for a year. Better get out before your health goes. And, besides, you’re—too pretty!”

“I don’t see what my looks have to do with it.”

The dark girl, who had finished her work with quick, experienced hands, began to help Christine replace her ribbons. Their heads came very close together.

“I don’t believe you do,” she said in a lower voice, “but you will soon. Many unpleasant little experiences will teach you. Of course, a girl can always take care of herself; still, it’s annoying! Have you noticed that good-looking man who has been in several times to have you match ribbons for his sister?”

“Yes.”

“His sister doesn’t send him to match any ribbons! That’s Gilbert Van Slyke. Did you notice the way he looked at you?”

"No—why should I?"

"No reason at all. But I did. And last night he was hanging round outside the door as we came out. He got in the same car with you."

"I did not see him."

"Well, look out for him, that's all. Gracious! I don't believe you know how stunning you are. You're not only pretty, you're different! A gentleman friend once said to me that after you knew a few girls all the rest were just as like as peas in a pod. But you're not. That's why folks stop and look after you in the street."

Christine looked startled, and then she laughed. "You're exaggerating," she said. "But I do find the work much harder than I thought. If I could only sit down!"

The dark girl glanced toward the stools with a sarcastic smile. "There's a seat," she said; "why don't you use it? You can't say that the management have not provided you with a stool."

Christine smiled faintly. She already knew that the stools, with no time to sit upon them, were a stock joke.

"Where are you going?" she asked the girl, with the directness which close companionship brings.

"Me? Oh, I'm lucky. I'm going into a tea-room. One of the swell kind that serve light lunches and charge heavy prices. I'll be on my feet a lot, but not all day. I'm not on till nine, and I'm off at six. Better pay, too. Of course, it's not an ordinary restaurant—it's not as if I were an ordinary waitress," she added quickly.

But Christine's aching back took no heed of the distinction. "It sounds easier than this," she said wistfully. "Do you think that I——"

The girl shook her head. "There was only one vacancy, and they had one hundred applicants. I got the chance through my cousin, who used to be—well, my cousin knew Miss Rodgers, who keeps the tea-room." So sharp is the caste line between shop-girl and servant that she could not bring herself to admit that the cousin had once been Miss Rodgers' maid.

"But I'll tell you," she went on kindly, "if there ever is another chance; I'll let you know in good time."

"Thank you, Miss Edwards," said Christine. She liked the dark girl. She had been uniformly kind to her, and kindness means more than faultless English in a hard place.

"I wish you would call me Molly," said Miss Edwards. "And, say, how is your sister getting on?"

"No better," said Christine, "but no worse. The doctor prepared us for a long wait. She just lies there. She asks no questions. I don't believe she thinks at all. Ada says she does not move a finger for hours together. She knows me when I am with her, but as soon as I am gone she forgets about me. That's good, you know, for she must not be worried, and it would worry her to know that I am working."

The dark girl nodded. She planted a remaining bolt firmly on the finished pile and helped Christine to spread the dust-cloth. "She used to be a good saleswoman," she said thoughtfully, "but—— Did you know that they were thinking of letting her go?"

"What?" asked Christine in surprise.

"Or, at least, they were going to transfer her to the mantle department. She would not stand that two weeks, and they knew it."

"Who wouldn't stand what?" asked Miss Blake, who, having got rid of the yellow-ribbon customer

more quickly than she expected, was also spreading dust-cloths.

"I don't believe it," said Christine flatly.

"Oh, you mean about Celia Brown?" said Miss Blake, comprehendingly. "My dear, you are very green. There isn't any old-age pension in this store."

"Celia isn't old!"

"But she was breaking down. It's the same thing."

"It's horrible!" said Christine, flushing.

Miss Blake, a tall, cool-looking blonde, smiled. "Yes, isn't it?" she asked, but with the indifference of one to an accepted fact.

Before Christine could answer another girl had joined the group. She was older than either of the others. Her chest was hollow and her eyes unnaturally bright. Her hair was bleached and puffed and tortured into a weight that her weak-looking head seemed scarcely able to carry. Just now she was alive with the animation of the news-teller.

"Say," she began, "did you know we are to be inspected? Yes, we are! We are on the eve of a new era. The old order is going to give place to new with a vengeance. In other words, some folks are going to get it in the neck!"

She paused a moment to enjoy the mystification of her audience, and then added in impish glee: "Mr. Torrance is home, and he's coming to inspect the Stores himself!"

"Gracious!" exclaimed Miss Edwards, pretending to faint against the case.

"When?" asked the more practical Miss Blake.

"To-morrow; so look your spryest. They say old Bunce is quaking in his boots. There's no telling what Mr. Torrance will do. But as he's going to take

an 'active interest' in things, he's bound to do something. Somebody'll sure get fired."

Christine turned pale. "Any of us?" she asked fearfully.

"No, ninny. We're not important enough. He'll want to make a splurge. It will be a case of 'off with his head—so much for Buckingham.' Now where do you suppose I've heard that? It came pat, but I'm sure I don't know what it means. Say, girls, did any of you ever see old Torrance?"

It appeared that none of them had, and the vivacious Miss Black rattled on—"rattled" is a good word, for her hard and jerky voice issuing from her little dried-up mouth put one irresistibly in mind of the rattling of dried peas in a withered pod). "They say he's a fine-looking man. His nephew or adopted son or something is too sweet for words. I've seen him with Miss Van Slyke. Say, he's a peach. Dark, with the loveliest eyes! They look at you so soft."

"You mean they look at Miss Van Slyke so soft?" suggested Miss Blake dryly.

"Oh, I don't know," with a toss of her head. "I guess I ought to know what I mean. If a cat can look at a king, I guess——"

"A king can look at—a cat!" laughed Miss Blake, with pointed emphasis. She did not like Miss Black.

"Cat, yourself!" said the other angrily. "And, if you know so much, I shan't tell you any more." Her angry eyes fell on Christine, who happened to be smiling.

"Perhaps you could tell who he looks at?" snapped the girl. "You ought to know something about the connections of the Van Slyke family. Gilbert Van Slyke looks often enough at you. But you'd better

tell him not to hang around the door so much. Lots of girls have got sacked for less."

Christine flushed crimson, but Miss Blake interrupted with easy insolence.

"Oh, drop it, Mary," she said; and, looking at Christine's crimson face, she laughed. "Don't you mind her," she added. And, laughing with the rapid adjustment of those to whom such "scraps" were familiar, the three girls moved off to get their hats.

Christine followed more slowly. Her common sense echoed Miss Blake's advice not to mind, yet in spite of herself she did mind. The coarse words flung at her from a spiteful heart carried a sting. She felt as if she had been pelted with mud which she could not brush off. Who was this Gilbert Van Slyke? And what had the girls meant? She did remember the tall and good-looking man who had taken so long to match ribbons for his sister, and had apologised so courteously for giving her so much trouble. She remembered wishing that all her customers were as considerate. And now the fellow-clerks were insinuating—but no, the idea was too absurd. Then she thought of how Tommy Burns would look if he had heard Miss Black's remark, and the mental worry dissolved in an amused laugh.

The laugh cheered her and changed the direction of her thoughts. By the time she had patted her hair into shape and pinned on her hat she had forgotten about Mr. Van Slyke, and was thinking instead about the letter in her handbag—the second letter from Mark! She had been able to give it only the briefest reading before hurrying off to work that morning, just a dip in here and there, for it was a long letter, but its presence in her bag had seemed to be a living thing all through the difficult day.

So full was her mind of the coming pleasure of re-reading it that she stumbled when getting on her car, and might have slipped badly had not someone steadied her from behind. "Allow me," said an agreeable voice, and, turning with brief thanks, she found herself looking into the handsome eyes of Gilbert Van Slyke! Yesterday she would have seen nothing strange in the incident, nor would she have thought of it again, but to-day she blushed hotly, and her ride home was made uncomfortable by the knowledge that Mr. Van Slyke, whom she had never met, and who was nothing to her, was seated abstractedly in the seat opposite!

CHAPTER XIV

FROM VANCOUVER

NOT until supper was over and Christine was sitting alone by the sleeping Celia did the coveted opportunity come. Ada was knitting in the outer room, and even if Celia woke she would not notice.

“MY DEAR MISS BROWN (the letter began),

“Do you know, I am beginning to believe with those metaphysical fellows that space is only an idea, after all! I have shot across three-fourths of a continent since I saw you; through a mining country which is a world in itself, across prairies which one day will give space for millions of little people like you and me, and over some of the most magnificent mountains on earth—yet I do not seem to be far away. The simplest solution seems to be that I have taken you with me. I am sure that I have never seen anything wonderful or beautiful in all this journey that I have not pointed it out to you, and enjoyed your pleasure in it. You will be glad to know that you grew rather weary of the prairie, and that the sight which you enjoyed most of all was the first glimpse of the mountains—far off, ethereal, rising, mirage-like, out of the blue distance like white summits of eternity. You were quite silent when you saw them and would not let me look into your eyes. When you did speak all that you said was that you

'had never seen mountains before,' but that commonplace remark meant more than all the volleys of 'Ohs!' and 'Ahs!' and picturesque choruses of admiration with which the party of amiable tourists behind us made the air thick.

"How we longed, you and I, to commit assault and battery upon the bodies of those tourists! If an amiable tourist is a brother, and if to look upon a brother with a wish to kill is as bad as murder, then you and I are twin homicides! Do you remember how, in going through Roger's Pass, we were forced to hear the very best recipe for doing down—or up—apple-butter? Have you managed to forget about the new waffle mixture which, in spite of cotton in our ears, we could not help but assimilate at the Great Divide? Do you still dream at night of a shrill scream, 'Oh, Ma, come here, you're missin' somethin' sweet!' For my own part, I shall never forget the still, sweet peace which descended upon space when our brothers and sisters—saved from sudden death by the bonds of an over-merciful civilisation—alighted at Mission Junction!

"Well, I have come to one conclusion, anyway, and that is that a man ought to know his own country. They say that St. Peter always asks a few geographical questions before opening a certain gate. Now, as a piano man travels a lot, I should be quite safe if he asked me about remote parts of China and even of Africa. I am not altogether ignorant of England and India, and I know quite enough of Russia and Norway—to say nothing of the usual routes of foreign travel—to pass me up head; but if St. Peter were to ask me if I had visited Niagara Falls, I can see my finish!

"Say, but we've got a great country, you and I. A colony are we? It makes one rather laugh—and, mind

you, I'm a loyal Britisher. But after what I have seen upon this journey the attitude of the average Englishman to 'Our Canadian Colony' seems truly funny. It isn't the bigness altogether, although that is stupendous, it is the atmosphere, the sense of beginnings, of boundlessness, of dormant power—whew! it's great. It has given an entirely new sense to the line, 'What do they know of England who only England know?' For this is as much England—or more properly Britain—as the Old Land, only over there they do not realise it yet. All the same, there is a sense of detachment which the average Englishman, wrapped up in his tight little isle, rather resents. There was a party of young Englishmen on the train. It was amusing to see their wonder grow. At the end of the fourth day one of them turned to me and said, 'By Jove! this is rather a big thing, don't you know.' I remarked that it was 'so so.' 'And everyone is so darned independent,' he went on. 'One would think that they owned the earth, you know.'

"I looked out of the window.

"'They do own a good slice of it.'

"'And this C.P.R.,' he went on. 'It's an octopus, don't you know. We ride in C.P.R. trains, we put up at C.P.R. hotels, we are conveyed in C.P.R. buses, and this morning when I asked the time of the porter he had the impudence to say, "What time, sir?—C.P.R. time." That's going rather far, don't you know, eh?'

"It is amusing to think of the surprise these young fellows must have got at Vancouver. One gathered from their talk that they were expecting the most astonishing things. One of them read aloud an article from a paper published in London, which seriously stated that the towns and cities of the Canadian West were no

places for decent women. That most of the women here were half-castes, and that the few decent Englishwomen 'led a life surrounded by temptation!' I wonder what those misguided youths thought of the writer of that article when they saw Vancouver's pretty girls, charming women, and beautiful homes!

"You liked Vancouver. You did not say much—it is not your way—but you drew a deep breath as you drank in the beauty of cloud-draped mountain and shining water. We did not listen very carefully to the man who was telling us how many war vessels could ride at safety in that wonderful harbour. I am going to send some p.c.'s so that you may see some of the views which you admired most.

"I am awfully comfortable here. Macgregor, the man I am to do business with, would not hear of me staying at the hotel. Nothing would do but that I must come right down to stay with him and become quite one of the family. Macgregor is the sort of man that one instinctively calls by his name, omitting the 'Mister,' not from any want of respect, but simply because any prefix seems trivial. He is a rich man, as rich men go out here, and all his money came to him, as he himself tells you in an aggrieved way, 'without his lifting a hand.' Having a passion for ownership, he bought land when land was going begging and the almost incredible rise in value did the rest. He told me his story the other night. In the old days he followed the railroad over the mountains, a mere day-labourer, living from hand to mouth. Then he fell in love with, and married, the daughter of the woman at whose house he was 'putting up.' She frowned upon his wandering tendencies and would not marry him until he had a regular trade. He learned carpentering, and being really inventive and

handy with tools, quickly had all he could do. Soon he became a small contractor with a flourishing business. His surplus he invested in land. 'Those were the good old days,' he told me. 'You think this place a good looker now, but it isn't in it with what it was then. We had a nice little four-roomed house cut right out of the woods and facing the water just about where the new esplanade is now.' He sighed as he spoke of it, and I ventured to ask him what it was that he missed. 'I suspect it's just youth, my lad,' he said. 'The country was young and I was young. I've got most things that a man sets out for, but there are some things every man is bound to lose on the way.' He was thinking, I suppose, of his lost youth and of his wife who died soon after they moved into the big new house. But he is far from being an unhappy man. His latest interest is timber, and his home-life is made pleasant by two of the finest girls I have ever met. When I look at them and think of the man who wrote the article in the London paper about Western women I alternately laugh and grow hot. As a matter of fact, either Jane or Marian could wear a coronet with distinction. Jane is the older and the taller and the fairer. She is built on big lines, and has a head and face that could give a Greek statue points. She is a university graduate, a linguist and a first-class musician. Her conversation—I use the word advisedly—is a joy. Marian is smaller and darker than her sister. Her hair is brown and crinkles over her little ears. Her laugh is her great charm. I wonder and admire every time I hear it. She is not as clever as Jane, but she is charming. If you remember, you were inclined to like Marian the better!"

Christine laid down the letter here and sighed dole-

fully. It was only too easy to visualize the two girls—Jane, so tall and fair, a linguist, a musician; Marian, with the merry laugh and hair that crinkled.

For the first time since entering the Stores she thought of a possible loss of her own beauty with a sharp pang. What if he came back from these lovely Western girls to find her, Christine, faded, ill perhaps, tired, dull and uninteresting. In panic she flew to her mirror and sighed with relief—she had not changed much yet! It was strange, she thought, that he said nothing about pianos—except that Jane was a good musician. Was he a musician himself, she wondered, and then flushed with vexation to know how much her want of knowledge pained her. So often little things like this reminded her that she knew really nothing of this man. That he knew nothing of her! He might care enough to write—but perhaps it was only a passing attraction that she had for him. When he saw her again, when he knew her better, he might not like her at all. When she spoke of this to Tommy he always wisely added, “Or you may not even like him.” But somehow she did not quite agree with Tommy in this. “Women are better judges of character than men,” she informed him sagely—at which Tommy only laughed.

She returned to the letter in a despondent mood. There was, she knew, another page of description of Jane and Marian, but this time she skipped it deliberately. She felt that she did not want to know anything more about them, and besides, the remainder of the letter, although not daring to be too outspoken, was in some subtle way comforting.

“You will wonder,” the letter continued, “why I am not at work, but this is really part of my work. I am getting to know what my uncle calls the ‘conditions.’

In another week or so Macgregor and I are going up the coast in a tug. It ought to be a trip for your life! We hope to get back before the rains, and then—then I am coming home! You know you did not promise to write to me, but you did promise not to forget me. Do promises really hold good in a case like that? I am such an easily forgotten fellow. I haven't even a big nose. I know that Miss Jane Macgregor thinks that this fact alone is damning. All great men, she says, have big noses. It's very discouraging. My only comfort was that Miss Marian, whose nose is sweetly small and tip-tilted, made a face and said that in that case she trembled to think of the coming greatness of the wash-woman's baby who was simply all nose!

"One's notions of caste get a sharp knock out here. My uncle, you know, is by way of being a bit proud of his family, and so forth, but he isn't a bit prouder than folk out here who haven't an ancestor to their names. These girls, for instance, whose mother waited at table and whose father worked as a navvy, would be quite undismayed in shaking hands with a princess. It would not occur to them that there was any reason for undue diffidence. But this attitude, undoubtedly genuine, is marred by a curious inconsistency, for once yesterday I heard Miss Jane excuse herself from calling upon a lady, newly come to town, on the ground that she did not know anything about her, and that 'One simply can't call on just everybody.' This attitude was also quite genuine—funny old world, isn't it?

"Are you going to write to me at all? I think that the fact of your not having written means that you do not intend to do so. I had no reason to hope that you would. The privilege of writing to you and the memory of your other promise is surely as much as any man—

with less nose than a wash-woman's baby—has any right to expect. But surely if you were ill, or in trouble, you would let me know. Surely I may take your silence as a sign that all is well and happy with you? If I did not believe that I would throw up this business in spite of fate and come home.

“Macgregor is calling me for a game of billiards—they have an elegant table. Good-bye, then—why has our English undefiled no word less formal than good-bye? *Auf wiedersehen*.

“Your friend,

“MARK WAREHAM.”

CHAPTER XV

MR. TORRANCE INVESTIGATES

MISS TORRANCE leaned back in her invalid's chair, tapping its polished arm impatiently, while Martha with deliberate movements dusted the books upon the round table. Presently her big voice boomed out.

"That will do, Martha! You have gone over that Tennyson three times. He hasn't been dead long enough to need quite that much dusting. You may put on your bonnet and go for a walk. As you go down, tell Mary that when my brother, Mr. Torrance, calls he is to come right up. Hand me my salts."

Martha fetched the salts sulkily. Her heavy face showed plainly that she had no desire to take a walk. Martha was a born spy, though rather a stupid one, and a visit from Mr. Torrance was an unusual happening.

"You're very kind, ma'am," she said, "but having had a raging toothache all night——"

"Take a walk to the dentist!" said the mistress promptly. "Go at once."

Martha, having placed the salts in the least accessible place, went out slowly.

"I declare her temper gets worse and worse," mused Miss Torrance. "What I stand it for, Heaven only knows. She is as curious as I am to know what Adam wants."

To conceal her impatience she picked up the much

dusted Tennyson, and when, later, Mr. Torrance was announced, she was still reading or pretending to do so.

"Well, Adam," she remarked austerely, "sit down. No, not there. Gracious! A man of your age ought to know enough not to sit in a strong light. You're not looking well. What's the matter?"

Mr. Torrance indeed was not looking well. His was one of those faces, more commonly seen in women than in men, which show unerringly a state of mental perturbation. Usually serene, the slightest break up of fair weather conditions was especially noticeable; but with the usual instinctive revolt from too plain speaking he remarked that he had not said that anything was the matter.

His sister waved this feebleness away with a strong gesture. "Obvious," she declared. "Or else why a tie which does not match, and why a visit to me? It is Mark, I suppose. Has he come back from that Thingummy place? I told you——"

"It is not Mark. He is still in Vancouver or thereabouts. I took your advice, as you know—wisely or unwisely. And now I want a little more definite information. This Miss Brown——"

The invalid waved her hand determinedly. "I have nothing whatever to tell you about Miss Brown."

"Now, Miriam, I know your stubbornness. In this case I appreciate its cause. Miss Brown's concerns are no affair of ours. This I admit. I am not prying. I wish merely to ask you a simple question."

"U—um!" said Miss Torrance. "What is the simple question?"

"Is this Miss—er—Brown a clerk in a store?"

Miss Torrance took a long whiff of her salts. She was enjoying herself immensely.

"A leading question," she decided, after a moment's pause. "But I don't say that I will not answer it, provided you, on your part, tell me why you want to know."

Mr. Torrance permitted himself to smile.

"My dear Miriam," he said, "I fully intend to tell you—otherwise I should not have been so foolish as to come. Besides, I want to tell someone—a sign of old age, eh?"

"Undoubtedly," agreed the invalid promptly.

"Yet at forty-five one is not so very old——"

Miss Torrance pursed her lips judiciously. "It depends upon the person."

"Well, we won't quarrel. You know that for many years I have taken a great interest in the conduct of the Stores, an interest which I have not been able to render as—er—practical as I could wish. But lately, when I found myself at home again, and with no pressing business to distract me, I decided to look into things practically, personally, you know."

The invalid closed her eyes and sniffed at her salts.

"Yesterday I went down to the Stores and had an extended interview with the manager."

"Really?" said Miss Torrance, opening her eyes.

"Naturally, it was the best way to begin."

"Naturally," agreed the other, "for, of course, if anything is wrong, the manager, who is responsible, would hasten at once to show you exactly where the trouble was, and implore you to dismiss him and provide someone more competent."

"U—um—I had thought of that. But there seemed no other course to take. A person in my position could hardly act the spy among the subordinates."

Miss Torrance sighed and closed her eyes again.

"Of course, I walked through the Stores myself first. I noted everything: the ventilation (which shall certainly be improved), the measures taken for the comfort of the clerks—stools, you know. I particularly noticed that all the counters have stools."

"How nice for the counters!" murmured the invalid.

"An eminent doctor once told me that it is nothing less than barbarous to expect a woman to stand on her feet all day. I am not a barbarian."

"Do you make 'em sit down?"

"I give them the opportunity."

"Oh!"

"I wonder," went on her visitor, with apparent irrelevance, "if you can tell me why so many of the girls——"

"Lady clerks," murmured the invalid.

"Why so many of the girls dress their hair in such an elaborate manner?"

"I am not a psychologist, my dear Adam."

"And why they have such—er—haughty manners?"

"Haughty! Oh dear! where are my salts?"

"I suppose it is the correct thing. They are all the same—nearly all. I noted some exceptions."

"Really!"

"Yes. You see, I went into it thoroughly."

"You would, naturally. But you were going to tell me about Miss Brown."

"Yes. I didn't know she was Miss Brown at first. I saw her almost as soon as I entered the Stores. She was at the ribbon counter, which is just at the entrance."

"What made you notice her?"

"Her hair, I think. Her back was turned to me at first. And I noticed her hair—wonderful hair. It was

not dressed like the other girls', but gathered low just at her neck. Its colour was—er—remarkable. I don't know that I can say just what colour it was—a peculiar gold——"

"Like honey, perhaps?" suggested the invalid.

A wave of colour suffused the man's face, leaving it very pale. "That was unkind," he said simply. "But, nevertheless, the epithet is not misplaced. This young girl's hair is indeed of that indefinable shade which made Mona's so lovely. Her face is beautiful also. I even fancied—well, it doesn't matter! After I had walked through the Stores and inspected everything, I had my talk with the manager. Mr. Bunce seems an able man, but I am afraid—I'm afraid he was not quite frank!"

"You surprise me!"

"For instance, I asked him whether that old rule which I had made was still carefully enforced. I refer to the employing of only such girls as have homes and other means of support, so that the rate of wages which we are compelled to pay shall be quite—er—sufficient."

"Is that a rule? Do you tell me that the only girls who receive employment in the Stores are those who can get along without it? In the name of common sense, why?"

"Because long ago I investigated and found out that, as a matter of fact, a girl, entirely alone and dependent upon herself, would find it hard to get along comfortably upon her wage. This, in the cases of some girls more fond of display, etc., etc., led to a—ah—deplorable state of things. Things which I need not discuss."

Miss Torrance laughed.

"Oh, you need not spare my blushes," she remarked. "I understand what you mean quite well. But did it

ever occur to you that if these girls (fond of display, I think you said, and dependent upon their own efforts) cannot get along with a certain sum a week, they will be still less likely to get along upon nothing at all?"

"I do not feel myself responsible for such as I do not employ," he replied with dignity, "but I felt that in my Stores such a state of things could not be allowed to exist."

"It never occurred to you, I suppose, to raise the wages?"

"On the contrary. I went most carefully into it with Davies, our then manager, and he proved to me most conclusively that the rate of wage could not be raised without impairing the profits of the business."

"It never occurred to you to—impair the profits?"

Mr. Torrance flushed. "I trust I am sufficiently a man of business," he said stiffly, "to see how fatal that would be."

"Ah—well, give me my salts. And go on with your story."

"Mr. Bunce informed me that the rule was most carefully enforced, and showed me a list of employees which seemed to give most satisfying details. I then spoke to him about the inaugurating of a Saturday half-holiday. He opposed the idea, but I was determined. I told him that it is getting to be the invariable custom in many large cities, and that the results were beneficial—most beneficial. Finally he came over to my point of view."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, he said that if it was really going to be a fashionable fad, it wouldn't do any harm to fall in line. Better to be the first to do it than to be compelled to follow someone else's lead. In fact, everything was

very satisfactory, and my mind was becoming quite easy, when an interruption occurred."

"Thank Heaven!" said the invalid fervently.

"The interruption was unpleasant. A shop-walker entered with a report. One of the clerks had fainted. Ordinary measures would not restore her. He wished to know what to do."

"How unfortunate for poor Mr. Bunce. What did the excellent man do?"

"I am sorry to say that he forgot himself. He swore. I do not permit such language from my managers. He told the man to call the ambulance, and intimated that he was several kinds of fool for not doing it without disturbing him. But I interfered. I requested that the girl be brought into the room, and laid upon the sofa, and that Dr. Carrington be sent for. I wished to know what had caused the faint. It did not look as if my rules in regard to the health of persons employed by me had been attended to. When the girl was brought in she proved to be——"

"Miss Brown, of course."

"Why 'of course'?"

"You started out to say something about Miss Brown, didn't you? Don't be stupid, Adam. My nerves cannot stand a stupid man."

"As it happened, the clerk was Miss Brown. She was still unconscious when Dr. Carrington arrived, but he restored her immediately. Her distress upon recovering was—er—pathetic. She seemed afraid of being discharged at once——"

"In accordance with the rules—naturally."

"All rules have exceptions, Miriam. Would any employer discharge a girl, evidently in great need and in sickness also, for no fault of her own?"

Miss Torrance's laughter interrupted him. She laughed until the tears came into her shrewd old eyes. "Spare me, my dear Adam," she gasped. "Surely you see how enormously funny you are? You won't have a girl who is really needy in the Stores; you won't have a girl who is delicate on any account. Both of these rules you have justified to yourself over and over, and yet at the mere idea of discharging a girl who is both needy and ill you fly into an admirable rage. Admit that you are amusingly inconsistent?"

"Not at all. This girl——"

"Don't argue, Adam, you know my nerves. Tell me what you did. It will be instructive."

"I wished to send Miss Brown (I learned that her name was Christine Brown) to a private hospital, at my expense, of course. But she pleaded most pitifully against it. Said she had two sisters at home who would care for her. The record showed that she spoke the truth, so I sent her home in a cab."

"Good."

"Then I had a talk with Dr. Carrington. He said her collapse was the natural result of a delicate and growing girl standing on her feet too long. I mentioned the stools, the manager (Mr. Bunce) mentioned the stools, and the shop-walker was able to give us the exact number of stools per counter. But the doctor said he didn't care how many stools there were; it was certain that Miss Brown had not sat upon them. He said that dozens of shop-girls collapse in the same way. Mr. Bunce admitted that he had known it to happen, but that they always got used to it after awhile. Dr. Carrington said that that did not affect the subject in the least. They had no business to get used to it. He said some very strong things."

"Carrington, did you say? I think I'll have him in to prescribe for me. The man I have now is a fool. Well, go on."

"That is really all. The girl went home. I ordered her to take a few days' holiday. I assured her that her position would be kept for her. She seemed grateful. Afterwards the similarity of her name and the name of the lady you mentioned in your letter occurred to me. I asked myself, 'Can it be the same?' Needless to say, I am going to personally investigate this case. I shall find out about her home, and whether this young girl really has sisters, and is in circumstances which render her eligible for employment in the Stores, or whether Mr. Bunce has misled me in saying that these things are always looked into. I confess that the young girl's fear of being discharged has filled me with grave doubts."

"I don't wonder," dryly.

"And now I ask you the question I came to ask: Was the lady mentioned in your letter employed in the Stores?"

Miss Torrance took a long whiff of her salts and closed her eyes. When she opened them they were bright with a resolution made.

"Adam," she said briskly, "I see no impropriety in answering your question. The Miss Brown I referred to in my letter was not employed in the Stores."

"You relieve me. You relieve me very much," said Mr. Torrance, rising to go. "I shall investigate this case without any leanings of—of any kind."

"The only way," agreed his sister, "in which any case can be properly investigated."

CHAPTER XVI

THE PLOT

It is perhaps hardly necessary to say that Christine did not go home in the cab so kindly provided by Mr. Torrance. The arrival of a cab at the House of Windows would have interfered with the legitimate occupation of its tenants to an alarming degree, besides conferring undesired fame upon the cab's occupant. So it was quite three blocks from home that Christine overcame the cabman's scruples and induced him to let her proceed on foot.

"I am feeling quite well now," she told him, "and the little walk will do me good; besides, my sister at home is ill, and it would needlessly alarm her to have me brought home in a cab."

The man, who had been generously paid by Mr. Torrance, and who had of his own accord taken an interest in his pretty fare, was loath to depart from his original instructions, but it was a hard man who could resist Christine when she smiled.

With a sigh of relief she watched him drive away, and turned, walking rather slowly, in the direction of home. She did not feel ill now, only dizzy—tired—unable to focus her thoughts. How would she explain to Ada? If she told the truth, it would be one more burden for Ada. If she did not tell the truth, what story could she invent which would explain her early

home-coming and the fact that she had a few days' holiday? How kind Mr. Torrance had been! She felt a great rush of gratitude to him for promising that her position should be kept for her. How handsome he was, she thought, how courteous. Beside him the hitherto omnipotent Mr. Bunce had appeared small and insignificant. But, in spite of all that kindness could do, the fact remained that she had fainted, and had been sent home with orders to consider herself upon the sick-list. How would she tell Ada?

So absorbed was she in this problem that she did not notice the old woman whose tottering steps followed her down the street. At the touch of a hand upon her arm she turned abstractedly, and started to find herself looking into a pair of very ugly, red-rimmed eyes. It was the same old woman of whom she had spoken to Tommy on the night of Mark's departure. Seen closely and in broad daylight, the creature was even more repulsive than she had thought. Red eyes, loose mouth, draggled grey hair, and a temporarily swollen nose made up an ensemble at which the girl shuddered involuntarily.

"You're Miss Brown, aren't you?" asked the woman in a whining voice. "Can't you help a poor widow that once had a darter as pretty as you?"

Christine flushed. "I am sorry," she said. "I would give you something if I had it. But I haven't a cent of money with me. Only some car tickets."

The old woman grinned maliciously, drawing still nearer to the tired and half-frightened girl. "Only car tickets, is it?" she began, but before she could finish her sentence someone jerked her, not too gently, away.

"Here—get out," said Mr. Gilbert Van Slyke. He could hardly believe his own good luck in stumbling

upon such a good excuse for speaking to Christine, but fortune sometimes favours the indolent as well as the brave. "Shouldn't let these beggars annoy you," he said with an affable smile. "Here, you!" He flung the old woman a coin, and with lordly gesture motioned her off the earth.

Christine, unprepared for this new annoyance, walked rapidly on. This, she thought with tingling cheeks, was what the dark girl had warned her of. How dared he! Oh, if she had only gone home in the cab!

"Awful rotters, these beggars," said Mr. Van Slyke, nonchalantly. "Oughtn't to be allowed, don't you know."

Christine said nothing and walked faster.

"Lucky I happened to be passing," he began again. But the badgered girl, taking a sudden resolve, slackened her pace, and, turning, looked him straight in the face.

"I do not know you," she said quietly, "but if you are a gentleman you will annoy me no further. I do not wish to appeal to the police."

This was something of a facer.

"Oh—er—certainly—excuse me—a mistake," spluttered the amazed Van Slyke. He had expected coyness or perhaps an affectation of haughtiness, but this simple and quiet directness took him by surprise. He felt, as he explained afterwards to a select few, as if he had been insulting a lady, don't you know! And before he had recovered sufficiently to make any further advances, Christine was far ahead. It was a defeat as complete and unexpected as Waterloo!

The discomfited young man gazed after her in angry amazement. Nor was his humiliation lessened

by the old woman, who now sidled up with an evil smile.

"Wouldn't the pretty lady listen?" she whined.

"Get out," said Van Slyke savagely.

The old creature tittered. "Fit for a king, she is," she insinuated, "and poor! Only car tickets, as I can swear. What would you give a poor widow if she knew a way to make the pretty lady listen?"

Van Slyke looked at the repulsive face with wonder merging into disgust. "What are you talking about?" he said. "What do you take me for? You old hag, if you don't get out I'll give you in charge." Unmistakable sincerity spoke in the young fellow's tone; he half-raised his hand to summon a policeman, but the old woman, seeing that she had mistaken her man, scuttled away.

"Wonder what she meant, and why she was annoying the girl?" mused Van Slyke. "Well, it looks as if it were no go in that direction—at present, anyway. Don't believe I was ever so hard hit, either. Beastly luck. By gad, I believe she meant just what she said. Sounded like the real thing. If so, it's all over with Bertie—it might as well be Europe for me! I'll never get her hair out of my head if I stay here. Wonder why the girls in our set don't grow hair like that?"

Musing bitterly upon this curious partiality of fate, Mr. Van Slyke retraced his steps. Spoiled child of fortune as he was and utterly unmoral, he was not dishonourable according to his lights, and, convinced that the object of his ardent but very temporary affections was really unresponsive, he would not persist in persecution. Yet never until the present had he been quite so "hard hit."

From the dusky entrance of a neighbouring lane the old woman watched him go. She was trembling all over with some suppressed emotion—fear, perhaps, or more likely rage, for she shook a skinny fist after the retreating figure, and, muttering inarticulately, made off herself in the opposite direction. She could move quickly in spite of her ancient limbs, and she must have known plenty of short cuts, for, avoiding the main streets, and keeping as much as possible to lanes and alleys, she came in a marvellously short time to Hill Street; and here it needed no special perspicacity to tell that she was at home. Hill Street does not need the presence of the burliest policeman on the force to betray its character. In the day-time it is a quiet street, but even then there is a “something” which causes the unwary intruder to hurry out of it with a cautious hand tight upon his pocket-book. Only the dwellers in Hill Street do not fear it, and, slipping past the blue-coated guardian at the corner, the old woman hurried on, greeting no one, and finally disappearing within the door of its most disreputable hovel, a residence justly celebrated in Hill Street as “Granny Bates’,” and shunned accordingly.

Once within this refuge she gave vent to her feelings in so vehement a manner that she roused to protest its only other occupant, a dark-browed man of forty.

“Here, cut it out!” he growled, raising a coarsely handsome face from the paper he was reading. “Stow it—d’ye hear! What’s come to you, you old harridan?”

At this the old woman’s mood changed suddenly, and, throwing herself upon one of the rickety chairs, she burst into wailing and tears, more disconcerting and, if possible, more disgusting than the violence had been.

The man rose calmly and shook her—not savagely, but as if it were a necessary matter of routine. “That’s enough!” he commanded peremptorily. “You’ll go off in one of these here fits if you don’t look out. Been following the girl again, have you? Now, look here, I’ve told you it isn’t safe. Do you want to give the show away?”

Under his drastic treatment the old woman’s wailing had subsided. “No, not yet; it ain’t time yet. I can wait. I’ve waited so long. I wouldn’t care how long I had to wait if I could only see it coming.”

“Well, you told me last week that you did see it coming.”

The old woman began to wail again. “That’s it,” she whimpered. “I’ve been disappointed—so disappointed! And I’ve waited so long. I thought I saw it coming when she went into the Stores; and then when that fine young spark Van Slyke began to notice her, I felt sure. But she won’t listen to him. She and her fine-lady airs! Better than my Agnes, is she? Blast her! And him such a fine-looking spark—blast his coward’s heart! Turn tail and off the minute she up and sauced him. Oh—oh!” She pounded her skinny fists upon the table in an ecstasy of disappointed rage.

The man, after a parting shake, filled a dirty pipe, and began to smoke philosophically. “Go it,” he said, “Go it! Some day you’ll go off altogether, and nobody sorry.”

With another change of mood the woman ceased her raving, and looked up with a curious grin. “And who’ll get my bit of money, Billy? Who but you, if you help me like you swore to.”

“Who’s saying I’m not goin’ to help you? Ain’t

I helped you? Ain't I played spy on them Browns for years, until you know more about their business than they do themselves? Ain't I held my tongue? Don't I know that Christine ain't no more Brown than you are?"

"Yes; but you don't know who she is, do you, Billy? Oh, you may guess, but you ain't got no proofs, have you, my lad? Trust your granny for that!" The old hag laughed evilly.

"Well," changing the subject, "what's the matter now? Given Van Slyke the stony eye, has she? I thought she would."

"He's a fool!" shortly; and, suddenly dropping her whine, "He'll never get her. Spoke to her in the street to-night, and made off like a whipped cur when she faced him. Told me to get out when I offered to help him."

"Did—did he?" the man chuckled. "Well, see here, you know what I always said: that girl's straight, and you can't get her to go crooked. If you want to get back at her dad that way, you'll get left."

"I won't get left. I'll have her yet. I'll see her in the gutter, where my poor Agnes went. She is poor already, and getting poorer. Wait till she's hungry. Wait till she's a skeleton, like Agnes, with want and sickness. Wait till she sees her sisters dying for want of medicine. Then she'll give in, like Agnes did—as good a girl as ever lived."

"I ain't sayin' anything agin' Agnes. She's been dead long enough to be a saint by now. But you'll never get this girl like Agnes. For one thing, she'll never be really hungry. She's got friends, hasn't she? D'ye think that Burns man would ever let them girls want? Proud, are they? But they'd take help from

him if they were hungry enough. She'd go to him for help before she'd look at any of your fancy men. I tell you you'll never get revenge that way. Why don't you just let him believe she's dead—ain't that enough?"

"Enough! To let him live thinking his darter's in a nice clean grave? Did I steal her for that? Did I keep my fingers off her baby throat for that? How did my Agnes die?—as good a girl as ever was. You know; and he did it. Him with his Stores and his wages that drive a girl to ruin. D'ye think Agnes would ever have listened to that traveller chap if she'd had good food to eat and medicine for her old mother? As good a girl as ever lived! And pretty—as pretty as his girl. No, I can't die till I tell him that his darter's where mine was. I'll drag her down. I'll——"

"Chuck it!" commanded the man again. Yet this time there was an oddly sympathetic note in his rough voice. Perhaps the old woman felt it, for she ceased her threatening, and subsided into a broken muttering about "As good a girl as ever was!"

"I ain't sayin' that you've no reason," began the man. "I'm just sayin' that it can't be done. That girl's born good and trained good. You can go agin' nature sometimes and agin' training most any time, but you can't buck up agin' both, ever. That Christine won't look at your Van Slyke or anyone else. So, if you're bound to get back at her dad that way, what you'll have to do is to make it seem like she did—see?"

The old woman was listening eagerly. He dropped his voice. "Your plan didn't work, that's all. You had her brought up by shop-girls, and now she's a shop-girl herself, and she's pretty enough to set every

man in town on her track. But that's all. She'll never listen to any of 'em. She'll marry respectable yet, and settle down. So that plan's a deader! Now, what you want is to get back at the dad. I may guess who he is and I may not, but I ain't got any proofs, and he thinks his darter's dead. Besides, I don't blame you for wanting to get back. I'm a Socialist, I am. Now, the only thing you can do is to get hold of the girl, and make believe she's gone off herself. There's a chance for that. I've been spyin', as per usual, and I know that Van Slyke is goin' to Europe. He's been putting it off on account of her, but as soon as he finds she's turned him down, he'll up and scoot. 'Sposing she went at the same time—leavin' no address, so to speak—eh?"

The old woman watched him with shining eyes. "That's it!" she croaked. "That's it! And the little bit of money, Billy, it's all for you, if you'll help."

"Oh, I'll help. But you've got no call to harm the girl—savvy?"

For an instant murder looked out of his companion's fierce old eyes. Then she dropped them meekly. "Sure not," she said. "It ain't the girl I want to harm. She'll be all right, trust your granny."

A look of what almost seemed relief spread itself over the man's face.

"That's settled, then. When we let her go, she can say what she likes. No one will believe her. She won't be any too clear as to what's happened herself. We'll take her West. By the time she gets back here, or gets a letter through, her hash will be cooked all right. Her father wouldn't want to have her then! But, mind you, she's not to be really harmed, or I'm out of it. Now, you leave me to arrange details. Only

tell me where'd be the safest place to put her before we can get her away. It may be a month before it'll be safe to try."

"That's easy. You know the inn on the Dalby road—Haffey's? It's changed hands. Sal Hornby's got it. She owes me one. That's the place. Respectable and all! The police ain't on to it yet. It's a place for your life, and Sal won't mind."

"Sal is hell! I don't like taking the girl there. I told you——"

"I know, Billy. But I'll see to her. Sal won't go near her. It's just to keep her safe, that's all. You know what kidnapping is if we're caught."

The man laughed. "If we're caught," he sneered. "I ain't been caught yet, have I? Go and get some supper, and get it quick!"

CHAPTER XVII

AN INTERLUDE

HAPPILY unconscious of the evil which had come so close to her, Christine hurried home. Her most prominent feeling was one of anger and disgust at the thought of Mr. Van Slyke and his presumption. She was not at all afraid of him, for that girlish instinct which is almost infallible had told her that in his case no fear was justified. Van Slyke's attentions might be impertinent but they would never become formidable. Besides, there was always Tommy. In spite of her weariness and anxiety Christine smiled as she thought of the exquisite Van Slyke in Tommy's avenging hands. The incident of the ugly woman she dismissed without a second thought, simply because she could conceive of no possible connection between herself and her. To Christine the old hag was but a street beggar, to be rather shudderingly pitied, to be helped if possible, but under no possible circumstances to be feared. No, the problem of real interest was how to break the fact of her holidays to Ada! This was still in a state of miserable indecision when she mounted the stairs in the House of Windows. She even opened the door with no definite plan in mind, but when she entered the room it was to find that fate had settled her question for her.

"Oh, Christine," exclaimed Ada in a voice which

fairly trembled with relief and which was at the same time much louder than usual. "I am so glad that you have got back from your walk. Celia is better—she has asked to see you!" Then, as she helped the astonished girl to remove her hat, she whispered hurriedly.

"She asked for you. I said you were out walking. Oh, how fortunate you are early to-night! If you had not come till the usual time she would have suspected. Every hour of peace of mind that we can give her will count so much. Go in to her now, and—don't tell her if you can help it!"

Christine nodded and went quietly in to the inner room. Celia lay there, weak still but no longer uncaring, and with an eager question in her blue eyes. When she saw Christine, the questioning look faded, a satisfied smile stole over her white lips.

"You are better, dear?" asked the girl, bending down to kiss her.

"Yes; what time is it?"

"Nearly half-past five, dear."

"Ah!" the invalid's weak voice held relief. Never as long as she could remember had Angers and Son closed at half-past five! She asked no more questions. Enough to know that her darling had not become a shop-girl—yet!

When she had sunk into sleep again Christine came noiselessly into the outer room. "It is all right," she whispered. "She is asleep."

Ada, who was spreading the cloth on the little round table for supper, gave way to the relief of tears, and the two girls kissed each other in silent thankfulness.

"She is sure to get well now," said Ada, wiping her eyes. "It seemed like Providence that you should have been early to-night. I saw her longing to ask and yet

afraid. Now she will have a good night's rest and will not need to be told until to-morrow."

"Not even then," said Christine. "I am not going to work to-morrow. I have some holidays. Mr. Torrance inspected the Stores to-day, and as a consequence some of us have a few days off."

"Christine! do you mean——"

"No, I am not discharged! Amazing as it may seem the holidays are genuine. And Mr. Torrance was so kind. I think he is the very nicest man I ever saw—I mean, the nicest middle-aged man! but, of course, he isn't young. His hair is quite grey at the temples. But he has a face one might dream about, dark and clear, with such kind brave eyes. The Stores girls are quite foolish about him, not that it does them any harm. I expect a little hero-worship doesn't hurt anybody."

"No," agreed Ada, and then, for no obvious reason, she sighed. Christine did not know and Ada herself was hardly conscious of the reason for that sigh; but it just happened that Christine's description had come very near to a secret place in the blind girl's heart. Every girl has a secret place, the home of an ideal, a prince, a glorious being never quite incarnate in this world! and Ada's prince, whom she would never see, had a face that was dark and clear, with kind, brave eyes. Poor Tommy!

He, Tommy, was coming up the stairs at that very moment. In one hand he carried a new magazine, in the other a jar of a new and highly recommended beef juice, and under his arm was carefully tucked a bunch of late asters in crinkly paper. A cheery visitor to be coming up one's stairs! But not a visitor to inspire daydreams. Not a visitor whose face was dark and clear and over whose eyes a girl might ponder timidly.

Tommy was eternally and hopelessly short, broad-shouldered, round-faced and sandy-haired; and his eyes—however brave and kind the soul behind—persisted in being china blue!

Unable to open the door on account of the beef juice, Tommy kicked it gently with his foot. He entered in silence and upon tiptoe, and indeed the only thing that marred the effect of his gallant carefulness was the dropping of the beef juice exactly upon the spot where it would make the most noise.

"Oh, Tommy!" said Christine, starting up.

The blind girl ran anxiously to listen at the invalid's door.

"Hang the thing!" said Tommy. "Isn't that just my luck? All the way up the stairs I expected it to fall any minute and was quite prepared for it. Then the minute I think I'm safe it does its worst."

"It was very careless," said Ada severely. "But thank goodness it did not wake her. What was it—a bomb?"

"Beef juice!" said Christine, picking it up.

"It's something new," said Tommy, recovering. "Cracking good thing, they tell me, simply full of nourishment. It isn't broken, is it?" anxiously.

"No, it's safe, and oh, Tommy, Celia is better! She has spoken. She asked for me, and now she is sleeping—real sleep. How nice that you have brought some flowers. They will be the first thing she'll see when she wakes up."

Tommy, who had brought the flowers for Ada, was too genuinely glad of Celia's improvement to object to this disposal of his gift.

"Sure!" he said heartily. Then, in a piercing whisper, "How did she take it about the Stores?"

"Hush! she doesn't know yet, and won't for a day or so. Christine has got holidays, Tommy. Mr. Torrance inspected the Stores to-day and gave some of the clerks a few days off."

"Holidays?" Tommy's blue eyes widened wonderingly. "Whatever for? As a kind of celebration? How many did he let off?"

"How many did you say, dear?"

"I didn't just say."

"But you must know." There was an edge of suspicion in Tommy's voice.

"I don't suppose the child counted, Tommy."

"No, of course I did not count," with an aggrieved air.

"U—um!" said Tommy.

"These flowers are really lovely," went on Christine hastily. "Will you take them in, Ada? You are lighter-footed than I. Put them on the dresser where she will see them first thing."

Ada went unsuspectingly upon the mission, and as she disappeared with the vase Christine turned to meet the other's accusing glance.

"How stupid you are, Tommy! Of course it was only me. I was silly enough to faint and Mr. Torrance saw me. Ada doesn't need to know that. I'm all right now. But I'll admit I felt dreadfully this afternoon. I don't know how I happened to faint, and it's quite true about the holidays. I am to get full pay and have my same place when I go back."

"Oh, indeed!" There was a volume of comment in Tommy's voice. Christine dimpled.

"He didn't do it on account of my good looks either," she said mischievously. "He did it to save himself the pangs of a disturbed conscience. I assure you that he

looked upon me with something like horror. I was a 'orrid proof of something rotten in the state of Denmark. Young ladies may faint, but not in Mr. Torrance's Stores, and, above all, not in Mr. Torrance's sacred presence. I could see that the poor man felt quite upset."

"Pity he didn't feel upset some years ago," commented the grim Tommy.

"Yes, but better late than never. You see, he's just getting around to it. If he really takes things in hand I can hear things falling in the future."

"So!"

"Well, I think he will. He's so nice looking. People don't look nice in that way unless they are really nice. Even Ada said he 'sounded nice.'"

"Did she? What is he like?" Tommy's voice was eager. But as, item by item, Christine set forth the details of Mr. Torrance's appearance, Tommy's face grew woebegone.

"He does not look at all like me, I suppose?" he remarked casually.

"Oh, not at all!" Christine's laugh tinkled musically. She did not mean to be unkind, for Tommy's broadness and shortness had always been a privileged joke; but this time, as she was quick to detect, the light words carried a sting. Was Tommy becoming vain?

"Tommy!" she announced dramatically, "guess what happened to-day? A man spoke to me without being introduced!"

Immediately all Tommy's selfish yearnings were forgotten. "Where?" he demanded briefly.

"In the street."

"What was his name?"

Christine's pretty eyebrows rose in innocent sur-

prise. "Now, Tommy, didn't I tell you he had not been introduced?"

"Well, what was he like?"

"Oh, just a man. Rather tall, rather fair, nicely dressed."

"Lots of men are that."

"Yes. He was like lots of men. But I don't think he'll annoy me again. He looked so ashamed when I spoke to him."

"When you spoke to him!"

"Yes, I had to, you know. I said, 'Young man, I know thee not. Let a humble maiden go her way in peace.'"

"Christine!"

"Well, I did, or words to that effect. You didn't think I could, did you, Tommy?"

"No, I didn't. I don't think it now. It's a shame and a disgrace that a young girl cannot walk on a public street without being exposed to—to that kind of thing." Tommy's anger spluttered fiercely. "And how about that piano chap—any more letters from him?"

Christine cast down meek eyes.

"One more," she admitted softly.

"Christine, dear, I wish you wouldn't. I don't like it."

Christine's eyes flashed up, sparkling.

"How can you say so? You didn't read it. It was a very nice letter. I liked it!"

But Tommy was not to be side-tracked. "I don't mean that letter, that particular letter," he said. "I mean the whole thing. You know so little of him——"

"Yes. It would be nice if I knew more," cheerfully. "But when he comes back I shall."

"You will have to tell Ada and Celia then," said Tommy grimly.

"Yes, and I have thought of a way—a lovely way! You see, you know him now. I introduced you. Well, you can just bring him to call——"

"Never."

"Oh, Tommy!"

"I tell you I will not."

"And then you could introduce all of us and everything would be all right."

"Would it?"

"And Ada would be spared such—er—anxiety."

"It will be you who will have caused it, Christine."

"Yes, but it would be your fault, really. Because if you refuse——"

"I do refuse."

"To introduce him, I shall have to say, 'Ada, here is Mr. Wareham. A young man whom I have met in clandestine fashion and with whom I have corresponded in defiance of Mrs. Grundy. Tommy knew all about it——' "

"Christine!"

"Well, you did, you know. Didn't you?"

"If I did, it——"

"Still asleep!" said Ada coming back softly. But knowing with that wonderful sixth sense of the blind that the atmosphere of the room was charged with feeling, she added quickly, "What is the matter?"

"I was telling Tommy my adventures and he did not like them!" pouted Christine. "And, oh, Tommy, there is still another! You know that ugly old woman I told you about? Well, she came right up to me and spoke."

"What ugly old woman!" The blind girl's voice

was sharp. Both Tommy and Christine turned to her in surprise.

"It's nothing, Ada. Just an old beggar. She seems to haunt these streets, and I have often noticed her watching me——"

"Watching you! Did you say 'watching'?"

"Dear, what is the matter? She was only making up her mind to beg. To-day she screwed up her courage and did it."

"What did she say?" Ada's face was so white that Christine was frightened.

"She only asked for money, dear. She is quite a harmless old thing. I never would have told you if I thought you would have worried. No doubt the poor woman was hungry—and I had nothing but car tickets!"

Ada's colour came slowly back into her pale face. "I am foolish," she murmured. "But I have a horror of beggars. Christine, will you run down to the store for some butter. There is none for breakfast."

Christine jumped up with alacrity, and for once Tommy did not interpose with his ready, "Let me go instead."

She was hardly out of hearing when the blind girl turned to him in a passion of nervous anger. "How long have you known this?" she demanded imperiously. "Why did you not warn us?"

"Warn you? What do you mean?"

"This old woman—Christine says you saw her—watching——"

"What of it? I did see her once, or thought I did. She is only an old beggar. The watching is all in Christine's imagination—nothing out of the ordinary, I mean. Everyone watches Christine; she told you

herself that she attempted to beg from her. It is quite an ordinary occurrence."

"Do you think so, really? It frightened me so. I suppose I am foolish. But it has always been like a nightmare to me." She dropped her voice to a nervous whisper. "What if that creature who deserted her is alive? Watching?"

"Nonsense!"

"How do you know? Or what if she left a sister or a cousin or someone who knows the story? What if one of them should come forward now? She is so sweet, so pretty! It terrifies me to think of that black shadow behind her!"

"Don't, Ada! Even if one of these improbable fears proved true, no one could take Christine from you—not even her own mother!"

"It isn't that! But think of what it would mean to her—the whole shameful story. To find out that instead of being one of a family, loved and cherished from her birth, and with a mother and father whom she can honour and love, she was that most pitiful of all things, a deserted child, left like a stray cat to live or die! Haven't you any imagination? Don't you see that it would darken all her life? Is it any wonder that I am terrified?"

Tommy turned away that he might not see the rare tears which filled the blind girl's eyes.

"Yes, Ada, I see. And I have guarded her as well as I could. And you two girls have been wonderful. But, really, I do not think that you need worry. That woman who left her is dead, depend upon it. And if anyone had been left who knew the story, you would have heard of her before this. Besides, the only possible motive for anyone speaking now would be

blackmail, and the demand would come to us, not to the girl. Then," Tommy's broad shoulders squared themselves, "we would know how to deal with it."

It was really too bad that the blind girl could not see Tommy's blue eyes then, kind and brave. Yes, they were indeed kind and brave and full of the love of a brave, kind heart. Some sense of it did reach her, perhaps, for she leaned over and took his short, square hand in her long white ones.

"Not many girls have a friend like you, Tommy," she said gently.

There was no one to see, so for once he looked at her as a man looks at the woman he worships; but the blind girl only knew that his hands grew cold under hers.

CHAPTER XVIII

MR. TORRANCE IS SURPRISED

ADAM TORRANCE had never been a hard man. Save where pride was concerned he had been considered, by others more callous than himself, to be quite inconveniently sentimental. It was known that no appeal from one in trouble ever reached Mr. Torrance in vain; the difficulty was to reach him. Like most rich men, he was well protected from indiscriminate appeals. His servants, his business manager, his secretary, formed a quiet but efficient bodyguard, allowing him to go upon his luxurious way in peace. But although he allowed himself to be thus guarded through a kind of moral cowardice, and the shrinking of a man who is half afraid of his own best impulses, it was always with the reservation that some day he intended to break through and look things in the face. Just what this "looking things in the face" implied, he hardly knew; but that it implied something unpleasant, he was satisfied. Men of this calibre are liable to long indecision with the seeming inconsistency of quick determination at psychological moments, so that Mr. Torrance's secretary need not have been quite so surprised when, the day after the interview with Mr. Bunce, he found his usually indifferent and somewhat bored employer determined to go personally into the business of reforming the Stores. Nor was he without

some very definite plans—plans which astonished the secretary the more by their feasibility. The would-be reformer was himself astonished at the secretary's astonishment, and vaguely irritated by it. He had been conscious for so long of his own determination to "do something" some day, and had been so long working up to a certain point, that, the point once reached, he passed beyond it with no effort at all. The slowly gathering momentum of all his idle years was behind him, but it annoyed him and hurt his pride to see that other people did not understand this; that they looked upon the inevitable expression of his long purpose as the sudden and erratic impulse of a rich crank.

Even Miriam, whom he had supposed would have known him better, had been inclined to be sceptical, and it was evident that Mr. Bunce, the manager, looked upon his interference as a temporary inconvenience merely.

Well, he would show these people that he was in earnest—in practical earnest, too. When Mark came back, he would have a helper. Mark would like nothing better than to be given a definite work. He was young and eager. His energies had not been atrophied by years of—well, of indecision! And he would probably have sense enough to know when a man was in earnest. Definite work would also do much to wean him from any lingering traces of his fancy for Miss—er—Brown.

Often in these days he congratulated himself upon having acted promptly in Mark's case. More and more he became convinced that he had not exiled him without cause. Something in the lad's letters seemed to tell of a subtle change. And Miriam had been so sure! How relieved he had felt when she had been able to

assure him that the young person named Brown in whom Mark was interested was not employed in the Stores! How awkward it would have been if the girl who had fainted had been she! In that case he would have felt—well, he would have felt remarkably like a villain in a book, like the cruel uncle of fiction, and other unpleasant personages. But since Mark's Miss Brown was not the Miss Brown of the Stores, he felt able to attend to the case of the latter without prejudice. There was no fear of him doing less than his duty, and his duty in this case was plain.

This is how he put the case to himself: A young girl employee of his had fainted while at work. Query—Was the girl unfit for the work, or was there something wrong with the conditions under which she worked? It was clearly his duty to find out first of all if she had been engaged in accordance with the Stores' principles. The easiest way to do this was to see for himself. A year ago this would have naturally seemed to be the secretary's work; now, it, just as naturally, seemed to be his own work. He would call upon the girl at her home and settle the matter in his own way.

How pretty she had looked lying there on the stiff office couch. How young, how charmingly childish! He had felt as a lover of flowers might feel upon seeing a lovely opening rose carelessly beaten down. A most unpleasant sensation! What wonderful hair the young girl had—honey colour! A spasm of pain crossed his face as he thought of that other whose honey hair had been the light of his life. Strange how this girl persisted in reminding him of Mona. They could not be really alike! But likenesses are strange things. Mona's eyes had been blue, and her short,

thick lashes dark; this girl's eyes were hazel, with long, curling lashes of golden brown. But, for all the difference, there was a resemblance. When she had looked up and smiled at him—surely Mona used to smile just like that! Mona's face had not been oval like Miss Brown's, yet Miss Brown had Mona's dimples. It was most remarkable—it was a torturing resemblance. What a freak of fate to see one's dearly-loved sister, long dead, smile up at one from the face of a shop-girl!

As he made his way to the House of Windows he braced himself to meet inevitable disappointment. He did not conceal from himself that he wanted to see Christine again, to convince himself that she did not really smile like Mona. It would be just as well to get that idea out of his head, for somehow there had seemed a reproach in that smile, a reproach which would vanish with the fancied resemblance. Doubtless he would find the girl with the lovely face in a vulgar home amid sordid surroundings; that would break the spell.

True, he had thought in the office that she had looked like a lady, but Adam Torrance had never suspected that a lady serving in a store was a possible phenomenon; not that he knew anything about it, only he had taken such things for granted.

His heart sank as he entered Brook Street. Already he felt disillusioned, for what could be expected of one whose home was here! At the House of Windows he gave up a last hope. It was horrible to think of anyone with Mona's face living in this human warren. Yet to retreat now would be to fail in his duty. The doorway stood open into the dirty hall, the dirty stairs stretched uninvitingly upward; with a sniff of distaste he decided to go on.

High up there was a sound of music. Was it a violin or a bird?—either would be surprising enough in this place, he thought. He paused to listen. It was neither violin nor bird, but a woman's voice singing. The air he did not know, but it was something sweet and simple, and the singer had a bird-like voice. Somehow the sweetness and purity of it made the dreary staircase less dreary. As he listened the singing stopped abruptly before he could determine from whence it came. He began to mount again with better heart.

At the Misses Browns' door he paused, taking a firm grip upon his resolution. It was really most embarrassing to call upon people in this way. He hoped they would not feel that they were being patronised or anything like that. And yet it is quite true that he had set out with the full intention of patronising. Someone laughed inside the room just as he knocked, and the laugh made him start and shiver—it was Mona's laugh!

The next moment the door opened, and Christine stood smiling in the doorway.

"Why, it's Mr. Torrance!" she exclaimed in pleased surprise. She offered her hand frankly. It had evidently not occurred to her that she was in danger of being patronised. Her ease of manner, aside from a certain shy delight, was as perfect as if she had been a Vere de Vere. "Ada," she said, "Mr. Torrance has come to see us."

He was within the room now, the dreary stairs were shut out, and facing him, with outstretched hand and a strange listening look upon her face, was Ada Brown. Strangers never knew that Ada was blind, yet Adam Torrance knew it in a moment, so quick and subtle is

the action of a rare personality upon one attuned to it. In the one moment which elapsed as he went over to take her hand, Adam Torrance drew nearer the true Ada Brown than many who had seen her daily for years. He knew also that it was she who had been singing.

"Song birds build high," he said, smiling. "I am out of breath."

Christine saw with amusement the soft red creep into Ada's cheek. Ada who so seldom blushed.

"Yes," she said prosaically. "But, in the absence of wings, one sometimes longs for an elevator. Won't you sit down?"

He had time now to glance about the room. The same room to which the little deserted baby had been brought sixteen years ago. The green table-cover had been replaced by another; a hole in the green carpet had been neatly covered by a rug; the chairs had been recovered; the curtains at the windows were different, but they still hung with a modest grace. Practically there was no real change in the room, and its air of homely taste and comfort struck the rich man quite as forcibly as, sixteen years ago, it had struck Mr. Thomas Burns of the book department at Angers'. There was no squalor or vulgarity here; poverty, perhaps, but poverty with a difference. Mr. Torrance fairly blushed at the recollection of his thoughts coming up the stairs.

"I see that your sister is already feeling the better for her rest, Miss Brown," he began a little awkwardly. Both of the girls were more at ease than he. "I suppose Miss Christine has told you——"

"Of your kindness in giving me a few holidays," interposed Christine softly. "Oh, yes, indeed I have."

"It was very good of you," said Ada gratefully.

"Ah—er—not at all. Your sister—I suppose you are sisters?"

"Yes," said Christine, "although we are not at all alike."

Their visitor certainly thought that he had seldom seen sisters more unlike; but this want of family likeness is not at all uncommon in cases where mother and father have both been of pronounced type—remarkably fine types they must have been, he thought, as he looked at the differing beauty of the sisters.

"It is very kind of you to come to see us," Christine said in her straightforward way. "I am quite well now, and on Monday I hope to be back at work. I think I can promise not to need any more holidays."

"You must not return until you are quite able," said Mr. Torrance, "and if the conditions of the Stores have anything to do with your illness, we wish to have these conditions remedied." He was grateful to her for bringing things so quickly to a practical level. "You see," he went on, "I am anxious to really understand the working of our present system. That is one reason why I called to-day. Would you mind, do you think, if I were to ask a few questions?"

"Certainly not," said Christine, "but I doubt if I can help you; I am so new. You know, I have been only a fortnight at the Stores. If Celia were able, she could help you much better."

"Celia is——?"

"Oh, I forgot you did not know. Celia is our eldest sister. She has worked in the Stores for sixteen years, ever since I was a baby. The girls say she got to be one of the best saleswomen they ever had." Christine's innocent pride in Celia's abilities was pretty to see, but it brought a fresh shock to her visitor. Celia, the

elder sister of these girls, a shop-girl for sixteen years ! He glanced again at the perfectly tasteful room, at the lovely, refined faces of its occupants, and his whole world of values began to reel. Meanwhile Christine, sitting with clasped hands and bright head bent forward, prattled away. She told him of Celia, of Celia's remarkable expertness as a seller of ribbons, of the beautiful neatness with which Celia "kept stock," of her own despair of ever being half as clever ; of how Celia did not wish her to go to work, and of how they had been obliged to circumvent Celia ; of how fortunate it was that she had come home early the other day, and so was able to allay Celia's anxiety, and, finally, of how they hoped Celia would be strong enough not to take a relapse when they had to tell her the truth. Adam Torrance listened to her in a dream. Was it possible that things like this were happening right along ? These three girls, one blind, and one a child, and one ill from over-work ? Christine had not said that Celia was ill from over-work, but he had no doubt of it. Neither did Christine make a bid for sympathy. She did not even seem to think that sympathy was needed. She was quietly and unaffectedly cheerful, a little worried about Celia, but confident that it would all come out right. The man's heart swelled with wonder at the bravery of her and with reverence for the quiet courage with which the blind girl acquiesced.

"Are you all alone ?" he asked Ada. "Have you—no brother ?"

She shook her head. "No," she said ; "but there is Tommy. He is like a brother. He is such an old friend——"

"My godfather," explained Christine. "He does

everything unpleasant for us : sees the plumber when the bill is too large, and sees that the coalman sends us decent coal. There are times," she remarked thoughtfully, "when one really needs a man."

Adam Torrance laughed.

"You increase my respect for my sex immensely," he told her.

"Oh, Tommy does much more than that," said Ada, quick in defence. "He helps us in every way. It is he who keeps up my garden. No one else would bother. If you will come to the window you will see what he can do."

To Christine's consternation their visitor at once crossed to the window. With a proud air Ada drew back the curtain. "It is not at its best now," she said; "you should see it when the roses are in bloom."

Adam Torrance looked out eagerly and caught back an exclamation. The tin cans and the waste paper looked even worse than usual to-day. A starved cat sat on the broken fence. An ugly dog worried an unhealthy looking bone.

Christine laid a timid hand upon his arm. "It is Ada's garden," she said slowly. There was entreaty in her look.

"It—it is remarkable!" said Mr. Torrance.

Ada dropped the curtain, smiling. "One is naturally surprised to see it in so busy a street," she said.

"But," he floundered, "don't you—do you never walk in it?"

"Oh, no," she answered. "It is closed. No one is allowed there. But that does not matter. I can imagine it all so well. No doubt it would be nothing but a wilderness if it were not for Tommy."

"No doubt," said Adam Torrance. In his heart he

found himself feeling a curious envy of Tommy. The making of Ada's garden was certainly an achievement of which any man might be proud. And this fellow appeared to be something of a gentleman. How old might he be, he wondered. If he were Christine's godfather, he was probably old. Nevertheless, curiosity pricked him. "I wonder," he remarked casually, "if I happen to know your friend. You said his name was——"

"Mr. Burns," said Christine. There was a dimple of mischief in her cheeks. "No, I do not think that you know each other. He left the Stores years ago. He is now managing a department in Brindley's Bookshop."

Here was another blow! He, Adam Torrance, had been guilty of feeling enviously toward a clerk. Where was this thing going to end?

"You amaze me," he said. "I would have thought that a man capable of—er—thinking out—such a garden would be possessed of some imagination."

"Oh, he is a poet, too," said Christine carelessly. "He has simply piles of imagination."

"Then why is he in a bookshop?"

"Why shouldn't he be?" The girl's voice was puzzled. "He never neglects his work to write poetry. And he loves books."

"Oh, Tommy is very clever," added Ada earnestly. "Mr. Brindley simply could not get along without him. Must you go?"

"I am afraid I must." He felt if he stayed much longer he would begin seriously to doubt the stability of his scheme of things. "For once in my life I am a busy man. I am, as you know, investigating the state of things in the Stores. Perhaps you will allow

me to call again when Miss Celia is better. As it is, you have given me many things to think about." Again he took the small hand she extended to him, and again it seemed to change miraculously from the hand of Miss Brown into the hand of some delectable princess. He bowed over it as a courtier might have done.

Upon the stairs it was already growing dark, and Christine, mindful of the third step from the top, lit the lamp and held it so that he might not have to feel his way. When safely past the pitfall, he looked back, laughingly, to thank her, but the laugh died on his lips. He put out a blind hand, grasping the greasy banister, for it seemed that he was at home in the old home of his early youth, and it was Mona who stood there looking down upon him from the dim stair with the lamplight, like an aureole, round her head!

"Good-bye!" called Christine cheerily. The vision faded, and he stood alone upon the dark landing.

CHAPTER XIX

A BABY'S RING

It was getting on for supper-time in Brook Street when Adam Torrance came slowly out of the House of Windows. An aroma of frying fish was in the air; through a dirty window from which the draggled curtain had been jerked aside he could see the table destined to receive this delicacy; its cloth, white once, was soiled and stained, its edges were ragged, its sprawling crockery ugly and chipped. Mr. Torrance had not seen such a table for many years—indeed, he had almost forgotten that such horrors existed. A vision of his own beautiful dining-room came to him, and, mingling with it, pictures of all the dining-rooms to which he was accustomed: their soft light, their pictures, their polished tables, their shining glass and silver and porcelain, their soft masses of flowers, the silent attendance, the delicate food. A sense of angry shock went through him. What was Providence thinking about? What did He mean by allowing people to live in places like this, to eat from tables like that, to be part and parcel, in fact, of Brook Street and everything which Brook Street stood for? He had no sense of the comparative, only a sense of outrage. It did not occur to him, for instance, that there might be people who would look in upon that splashed and ragged tablecloth with envy in their hungry eyes;

indeed, the thought of a human being feeling actual hunger would have seemed less pitiable to him than the thought of another human being being compelled to satisfy his craving in such surroundings. But then, Mr. Torrance had never been more than pleasantly hungry. Hunger, to such as he, was a delightful sauce to be delicately cultivated.

As he stood there a little child came up to stare at him, and then another and another. They seemed to rise out of the ground, and their sole business in life seemed to be staring. Mr. Torrance was irresistibly compelled to return the stare, and what he saw surprised him not a little. These children who lived here and ate fried herring were just like any other children. They were dirtier and more ragged, but for the rest they were just little plump, round-faced children with childish eyes. Mr. Torrance loved children. At heart he belonged to that primitive type of man who really lays no undue stress upon a sticky mouth and black little hands provided the owner be small enough. So he smiled at the staring children, and they smiled back.

"Going in to supper, kiddies?" he asked casually, buttoning his glove.

The starers did not seem interested in supper. "Say, are you the doctor?" asked one little fellow curiously.

"I said he ain't," sang out another. "I told you he's the preacher."

"Well, he ain't," echoed a third. "He's an undertaker. Look at his gloves."

This seemed conclusive. They all looked at his gloves.

"I'm afraid you are all wrong," said Mr. Torrance,

laughing. "I'm the ice-cream man. That's what I am!"

How the eager eyes searched his face! "Ah, what's yer givin' us?" said one sceptically.

"I keep my ice-cream in a store at the corner," said the ice-cream man. "You'd better run and get some before it's all gone."

But they were not going to take a big thing like this on trust. Before he knew it, two dirty little hands were slipped into his, and the remainder of the escort lined up behind.

"You come too!" said the spokesman. "They won't give us nothin' unless they sees you."

"You surprise me," he said gravely. "I did not know that the scepticism of the age was affecting the ice-cream business."

"Can we get the pink kind?" inquired the spokesman.

"Certainly, if I have any pink kind left. I think I have some left," he added quickly.

The escort gave a faint "Hooray!" quickly checked. They entered the store at the corner in good order. Not for worlds would they have imperilled their promised treat by want of decorum.

"We have come for ice-cream," said their conductor, "the pink kind."

"Five- or ten-cent dish?" asked the waitress briskly.

A dozen eager necks craned forward.

"Ten-cent, of course," said the ice-cream man.

A long sigh of contentment passed around the circle. He was a real ice-cream man after all!

Mr. Torrance's last sight of Brook Street was a dingy ice-cream parlour crowded with happy children,

and presided over by a hard-faced woman, who, for once, seemed strangely human and not above the extravagance of putting an extra peak upon those gloriously pink ten-centers.

"Good-bye, ice-cream man!" shouted the children; and it is significant of yet another change in the outlook of this personage that as he waved good-bye he quite forgot to pity the youngsters or to feel his own manifest superiority in the scheme of creation. "Nice little kiddies!" he thought comfortably, as he swung himself on a car, and, chuckling a little, he removed the now soiled gloves of the "undertaker."

In the quiet of his library he thought of it again, and again he chuckled, wondering what Mark would have said had he been there to see. Mark—Mark was almost a child himself. A child longing for something which he could not have—that was why he had been sent away. With an impulse of loneliness, he rang the bell and asked if there were any letters.

"No, sir," answered the correct Benson. "That is to say—yes, sir, there is this, sir. It did not come by the regular mail, sir."

"This" was an object upon which any well-regulated servant might look with scorn. It was an envelope of sorts, but so dirty, so dog-eared, and so scrawled upon that one did not wonder that the "regular mail" had scorned to deliver it. Lying upon its silver salver, it looked like a very bad joke or—a message from the Fates!

Mr. Torrance regarded it with disfavour. It was a begging letter, of course, and as such was not his affair. "Give it to Mr. Jones. Tell him to attend to it."

But Mr. Jones, it appears, had attended to the

regular mail, and had then gone out. There was nothing for it but to open the unsavoury communication himself or to wait until Mr. Jones should return. Ordinarily he would most certainly have waited; would have thought, indeed, no more about it, but the influences of the afternoon were still strongly with him.

Strangely enough, he had no premonition of horror, no foreboding of any sort, as he picked up the soiled thing lying on the salver. We call that sixth sense, which sometimes gives us warning of the approach of great or terrible things, "strange." But is it not far stranger that these things should steal upon us unawares? Is it not more marvellous that their step should be silent, their approach unheralded? Is it not passing strange that one moment a man may stand facing the future, head up and with a smile, while hidden from him by only a few moments, a few ticks of the clock, is some undreamed-of blow of fate which will bring his life a clattering ruin about his feet?

Adam Torrance opened the soiled letter with a rather tired smile, but with a comfortable feeling in his heart that he was really doing his duty at last. No more shirking of unpleasant things, no more passing over of responsibility to Mr. Jones.

Not until he had the single sheet of paper which the envelope contained spread carefully out beneath his reading-lamp did the first dim warning sound. Then some instinct at the back of his self-satisfied brain seemed to stir. "There is trouble here," it telegraphed. A nameless sense of lurking danger awoke, his heart began to beat more rapidly. "Danger, danger," telegraphed the inward monitor; but its warning was not

very loud, and Mr. Torrance himself was conscious only of an unexplained premonition of evil. Carefully, and still smiling, he adjusted the glasses, which he really did not need, and read the lines which were to write themselves in black across his world.

"MR. ADAM TORRANCE. SIR," he read (the writing looked like that of a bad hand at its best or a good hand purposely made almost illegible—where had he noticed the same peculiarity before?). "You never expected to hear from me again" (he read on slowly), "but now the time has come. You thought your baby died, but she didn't. That would have been too good. She's alive all right, and going down to hell like my poor girl that your Stores ruined. My girl was a shop-girl. Your girl is a shop-girl, too. Where my girl went, your girl is going. When she's lost for ever, like my girl was, I'll tell you. You can have her then if you want. But you can't save her. The end will come soon now. I'll let you know when. Never say one mother didn't get her revenge. To show you I speak truth, I send you her ring."

Mechanically he shook the dirty envelope, and there rolled out upon the polished table a baby's gold ring set with a pearl. He knew that ring well. He grasped at it with a choking sound. It rolled away from him, falling and hiding itself among the rich rugs upon the floor. After staring a moment, he fell upon his knees, searching with frantic eagerness—it was such a tiny thing, so easily lost, so frail a thing, so easy to trample under foot! He thought only of the ring, he did not dare to let his thoughts stray from it. There was something else, something horrible, unthinkable, something about the child who had once worn the tiny ring. He dared not think of that—only of the ring!

But the ring, so small, so frail, eluded him. He could not find it——

When, later, the stolid Benson came in with the respectful information that Mr. Jones had returned, he thought that the library was empty. Then suddenly he saw his master lying face downwards among the crumpled rugs upon the floor !

CHAPTER XX

THE SEARCH BEGINS

AGAIN, as if, in defiance of aphorism, history were taking pleasure in repeating itself, the servants in the Torrance house went about with frightened faces. Of the strange seizure which had overtaken the master the night before they had no explanation, but real tragedy brings with it an atmosphere as impalpable yet as penetrating as the air we breathe. Mr. Johnson, the detective, felt it as he sat in the library waiting. He had scented calamity from the moment of coming into the house, and now Mr. Torrance entered with its history written large upon his haggard face. As once before upon entering that room, he came slowly, and in his hand he held a scrap of dirty paper; only, this time, he left no distracted woman upstairs. Whatever the burden was, it was one which he must carry alone.

The two men shook hands in silence. Both were thinking of that other meeting, and the memory weighed. The detective was the first to recover himself. He cleared his throat delicately.

"Nothing very wrong, I hope, sir?" he said. "You are not looking yourself. Must have had a nasty shock. They tell me——"

"I fainted? Yes, I believe I did. It was very sudden—the shock. But I am quite recovered. Physically, I am well, but I cannot answer for my mind if—

if something is not done!" His firm lip trembled—a bad sign.

"Something shall certainly be done at once," declared the detective calmly. "As you say, it will be better not to prolong the—the suspense. If you will tell me just exactly how things are——" He sat down comfortably and crossed his feet with a show of ease.

"First, do you remember the other occasion upon which your help was needed? Do you remember the details?"

"Certainly. It is my business to do so. Before coming here I looked up the whole case. I keep a full record of all my cases, even such as appear to be settled."

"Ah—yes. Such as appear to be settled! We thought that case was settled——"

"Excuse me," interposed the detective neatly, "you thought."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that it was you, if you remember, Mr. Torrance, who thought that the case was settled. When you received the letter announcing the death of the child, you were convinced that the child was dead. It was a matter of conviction, not of proof."

"I was convinced," said Adam Torrance. "Do you imply that you were not convinced also?"

"For argument's sake, we will say that I was, although, as a matter of fact, I am never certain of any death until the law, so to speak, has passed upon the body. This child's body was never found; therefore, speaking from a professional standpoint, I could not go so far as to say that the case was definitely closed."

"That is beside the point. As a matter of fact, we

both were convinced that the child had been murdered or had been allowed to die in revenge for a real or fancied wrong. What we might have done had we not been so convinced, I cannot say. I dare not think. If I should once begin to reproach myself with negligence or too much credulity at that time, I should go mad. At present I am still sane, and I know that I was blameless in the matter. Let us put it aside if I am to retain my senses."

"I think you are wise," said Mr. Johnson quietly. "Let us begin all over again. You have another letter? I have the first here. I have brought it with me."

The two men placed the slips of paper under the reading-lamp side by side. In silence the detective read the scrawled words of the second letter. "My God!" he said.

"Is the writing the same?" asked Mr. Torrance dully. His hand did not shake as he spread the papers out more carefully. They went over them together.

At first glance it could be seen that the paper was different, the ink different, but, allowing for the fact that the second letter was much more shaky than the first, more soiled and more blurred, the writer of them both was undoubtedly the same.

Adam Torrance wiped a cold sweat from his forehead. "That proves it," he said. "I felt that it was the same. Now I know. The same fiend wrote both the letters."

The detective's examination was more minute, but his conclusion was similar.

"It is undoubtedly the same," he declared. "The hand that wrote this second letter is older, and more unsteady with continual drinking, or illness—drink, I should say—the paper smells of it! The envelope is

poorer; probably the sender is poorer also. The ink is thick and old—like the ink in a bottle seldom used, perhaps a bottle in some third-rate eating-house or tavern. The pen has been almost past its use. All these things might be feigned, but I am inclined to believe them genuine. If there is anything in the story at all, they must be genuine, for the person writing must, by her own story, be in the depths of poverty and degradation. Yes, I think we must consider them genuine."

Adam Torrance moistened his dry lips. "And where does that lead us?"

"Nowhere—at present. But it shows us that we must look for our party in the slums, among the very poor."

"The party who wrote the letter?"

"The party who wrote the letter."

"You have not told me what you think of the letter itself—of the truth of its assertions, I mean."

"My dear Mr. Torrance, I do not know what to think. The letter appears to be genuine. It is horrible enough. We must do our best to find the writer."

Again Mr. Torrance moistened his dry lips.

"If the letter is genuine, the assertions stand at least a chance of being true. There is at least a chance that my daughter is alive to-day; that she is a young girl at an age which needs every loving safeguard; that she is somewhere in this city——"

"Now—go easy! You'll break down if you go on like that. Don't imagine. Refuse to imagine. Get down to facts. There may be nothing in this at all. If there is, we will soon find it out. Stick to that. What makes you imagine that she may be hidden in this city?"

"I don't know—a feeling. It came to me last night. The fiend who wrote the letters is here. This letter was delivered by hand, slipped in the letter-box—see, it has never been through the mail at all! Would she not, in her morbid revenge, have the girl under her own eye? Would she not add zest to her revenge by having my daughter within reach of my hand and yet so utterly beyond me? I tell you, Johnson, I believe that if we find her at all we shall find her in this city!"

"You may be right. The first thing to do is to offer a large reward for information leading to the finding of the person who dropped a letter in the letter-box of this house. Money is no object, I suppose? It gives us a chance, for if the letter-writer did not venture here herself someone ventured for her. And it will be a queer thing if money will not make that someone speak. Of course, if she brought it herself, we lose that chance. But it is worth taking. You have questioned the servants?"

"Yes; they know absolutely nothing."

"Well, I'll question them again. I'll mention that there is a reward. It may help."

But no persuasions of the bland Mr. Johnson and no offer of reward could extract from the servants information which they did not have. Whoever had brought the letter had managed to bring it unseen and unheard; some time, while the master of the house, in the character of benefactor, had chatted with the sisters at the House of Windows, or while, in the character of ice-cream man, he had brought paradise to Brook Street, a sinister shadow had flitted by, leaving this dreadful thing in its wake.

"They don't know anything," said Johnson at last.

"We will insert the reward in the papers at once. Then we will go through the stores of this city with a sieve. How is it with your own Stores—any record kept of the family connection of its employees?"

"Oh, yes; there is supposed to be a complete record."

"We'll hope the others are the same. We'll sift them out. We'll investigate all orphans, all adoptions, all households which have anything at all irregular in their families. It can be done quite quietly and without giving offence. Not until we know the parentage of every girl in every store in the city shall we be justified in concluding that she is not among them."

"But think of the time."

"With money we can shorten time. It will not be a long job at all if I can have all the help I'll need. The cases needing special investigation will be comparatively few. You yourself are not in touch with any of your employees, I suppose?"

"No—that is, I have not been until the present. But since my return from abroad I have been personally looking into the management of the Stores. I have met only one family personally. It is a family of three sisters—the name of Brown. The eldest sister is ill, and the youngest sister is taking her place in the Stores. The other sister is—is blind."

"No one else in the family? No adopted child?"

"No."

"Well, that is one family off our list. We will begin at once. The age of the lost child would be sixteen. Is that right?"

"She would be seventeen next May."

"That narrows our search still more. For although

it would be unlikely that the child would know her proper birthday, she would probably be aware of her age within the limit of a year. Things look brighter than I had expected. Perhaps the old hag who wrote the letter has given us all the clue we need in telling us that the girl we seek is working in a store. I fancy that she does not mean a small store—such a store as might employ one clerk, or two or three; far more likely the girl is lost in one of our great departmentals, where she is one of a hundred, a tiny spoke, almost lost to sight in turning the immense wheel. That is probably what the woman's own daughter was. Stay! It is what she was, for was she not employed in your own Stores? That makes it all the more certain that we shall find the object of our search similarly situated. Why, the search may not be so long after all!" He pocketed his notebook and picked up his hat with a brisk air of confidence, and so potent is suggestion that for the first time since the shock of the letter Adam Torrance felt something like hope.

"Do not spare money," he said. "Thank God, there is plenty. But you must let me help too. I could not stand the suspense otherwise. And I have telegraphed for Mark—Mark Wareham, my adopted son."

"Oh," said the detective, pausing and darting a rather keen look at the other. "I did not know that—er——"

"That I had adopted Mark? At least, it is the same thing. He has been like a son to me for years. But, don't mistake: if—if my child is found, no one would rejoice more than Mark."

"Um—m," said Mr. Johnson. "Just so. Let me see—is Mr. Wareham a nephew?"

"No. He calls me 'Uncle,' but, if we come down to actual relationship, he is only a distant cousin."

"Independent fortune?"

"None. But you mistake if you think that Mark is mercenary. He is no weakling either, and could at any time make his own way. It has been by my will and not by his that he is in the position he is. You will find him as eager in this search as if he were my own son."

The detective snapped his notebook shut again. "Well, I'll take your word for him, and you'll excuse my questions. I don't come across many such disinterested young men—not in my business! Let me know when he arrives, and we'll keep him busy. And don't you worry—er—more than you can help. You know," he added awkwardly, "I don't believe that there is anything in that—er—threat, you know. If the young lady is alive, it is quite possible that she may be—er—supporting herself. But, bless me! there's no disgrace in that. Lots of young ladies do it. Doesn't hurt them at all; does them good. You can take it from me that there's nothing in the other—er—suggestion."

Adam Torrance shuddered. "How do we know?" he asked. "How can we be sure? Such things have happened. If she is alone and helpless——"

"Now, don't think of it! Such things have happened. But they don't happen anything like they might. If you were in my business, you'd be surprised. Yes, sir, you'd be surprised how seldom such things do happen—everything considered. And blood tells. Don't you ever believe but that good blood tells. Yes, sir, I've seen it too often not to know."

The miserable man looked at him gratefully. "Yes, I have thought of that. It is my best hope. Her mother's daughter—surely her mother's daughter."

"Don't you ever doubt her mother's daughter," said the detective cheerfully. "Wherever she is she'll pull through."

But as he left the house behind him he looked very grave.

CHAPTER XXI

CELIA KNOWS DEFEAT

THE sun, which in these autumn days was getting lazier each morning, was well up and shining cheerily through the curtains of the House of Windows when Celia woke upon the day which was to see Christine return to the Stores. They had told her about it the night before, and it had seemed to Celia then that somehow life had cheated her. Ada and Christine and Tommy had urged, explained, and entreated. They were all against her, and perforce she had given in. Their victory had been the more easy in that Celia herself had few arguments to support her opposition. She did not herself understand the reason for the stand she had taken; she only knew that she had fought for it, given herself for it, lavished on it every energy of heart and brain. To be defeated at last was bitter. She looked back slowly, heavily, through her sixteen years of struggle, and realised how impossible they would have been had it not been for the hope which had upheld her. To give Christine what she had missed herself; to hold back with frail hands the juggernaut which had crushed her own youth and to see Christine free, healthful, and beautiful. This had been the one sustaining purpose of her life. She had lost all sense of proportion, of course; and when they explained to her that Christine's work at the Stores

was but a temporary expedient, she had no real sense of their meaning. She could not realise the calamity as a partial one. To her the fact of Christine's entering the Stores at all was defeat open and avowed.

Yes, life had cheated her! It had whispered to her to work on and on, and then, when the goal was within sight, it had allowed her to be stricken down, drained of strength, a helpless, useless being, too weak to raise a hand to avert the overthrow of her one hope. They had all been so kind, she felt no resentment against anyone, but not one of them had understood. She knew that they considered her unconquerable opposition unreasonable, lacking in common sense.

She had said very little. She was too weak to argue, and, anyway, she knew defeat when she saw it. A profound depression settled down upon her, a depression in which all speech had been swallowed up. From a great depth she seemed to look up at Christine, so young, so pretty, so eager to help; Ada's voice seemed to come from a long distance; Tommy's kindly reassurances were only a vague invitation. When they had left her she sank almost immediately into sleep, an oppressed sleep where her soul seemed to bear its burden of defeat toilsomely through endless worlds of confusion and unrest.

She awoke to find the autumn sun bright upon the wall and Christine standing before the mirror pinning her pretty hat over her bright hair. Celia could see the face in the mirror thoughtfully smiling. The hat was being adjusted very carefully, with a slow sliding-in of the long pins. She had watched Christine put on her hat just so thousands of times, and never without a little thrill of pride in her utter gracefulness. Now, instead of the thrill, was only a dull heaviness.

Christine gave the hat a last adjusting pat and turned to her.

"Oh, you are awake, dear," she said, slipping her round young arm under Celia's head in order to kiss her more thoroughly. "Isn't it a scrumptious morning? I am starting early so that I may walk all the way. I don't believe they ever have weather like this anywhere else in the world."

Celia managed to smile faintly, but Christine's eyes were sharp enough to see the effort. Immediately she abandoned her idea of walking to the Stores, and sat down comfortably upon the bed.

"Cissy," she said, using the old baby-name which had been the first word she had ever said, "I don't believe you are a bit resigned, in spite of all our efforts. You do not look resigned, so I am going to tell you the other part of my plan. Tommy and I have been talking it over. When you are quite well, and have had a good holiday and are strong again, I am going to leave the Stores at once, and take a special business course. Tommy is going to lend me the money. I think I am just as proud as you are, dear, and you can trust me that it will be a strictly business proposition. The amount needed will not be large, and Mr. Brindley has guaranteed me a good position as soon as I can take it. Then I can pay Tommy back. We won't insult him by offering him interest, and, of course, no one could ever pay back his kindness, but otherwise we shall be businesslike to the last degree. You know, he wants to give me the money to go to the university, but I couldn't take that. The time is too long and the risks too great, but the other proposition seems reasonable. What do you think?"

"Yes," said Celia vaguely. There was no use in

disagreeing. But she had no faith in the plan. It would never be carried out. The Stores would see to that. They would never let her go, this ignorant young thing, sitting there so confidently, planning impossible things with level brows and smiling lips. Try as she would, Celia's tired mind could not get past the Stores. She could see no future for anyone who entered there.

"Christine!" called Ada's voice from the sitting-room, "you will be late."

Celia turned her face away, and Christine, thinking that she wished to sleep, drew the blind quietly and went out.

"You'll have to take the car now, dear," said Ada. (She had all the wonderful time-sense of the blind.) "But, before you go, look at the letter behind the clock. It came yesterday when you were out. It is only a circular, I suppose. Isn't it strange that people should send us circulars? I wonder how they get the address?"

"From the directory, I suppose," said Christine. Her cheeks were flushed and her hand was trembling. The letter had come then after all! She had been out when the mail came, and had not realised her disappointment when, upon her return, Ada had said nothing about a letter. She stretched up a hesitating hand to the clock. Oh, how disappointing if it should be a circular after all!

"Is it a bill?" asked Ada anxiously.

"No, dear; it's—oh, nothing. I'll take it with me. I must run. Good-bye!"

"I must tell her," thought Christine, as she sped down the steps. "I feel like a conspirator. I'll—I'll get Tommy to tell her. No, that would be cowardly. I'll tell her myself. I'll read her the letters. She will

enjoy them. There's nothing in them that anyone might not see—only I don't seem to want anyone to have the chance." She laughed in amusement at herself. Somehow the world seemed a specially pleasant place this morning. The crowded car was flooded with autumn sunshine, but she did not realise that it was she herself who brought some of the glory with it. She only noticed tired faces looked up at her brightly and that one fatherly old gentleman beamed upon her broadly as he made room for her in the corner.

And the corner of a crowded street-car is as good a place as another for the reading of a letter. Truly one's toes may be trodden upon and one's hat crushed, but there is something delightfully private about a crowd. One may blush and smile at will, quite hidden by the broad party who hangs upon the strap in front of one.

Christine's letter was shorter this time. Her correspondent frankly confessed a falling-off. "I do not seem to be able to write for nuts any more," he wrote despairingly. "I don't know why. I always thought I was rather a dab at writing. And all the time I am thinking such jolly things to say, but when I sit down I can't think of them, 'not if it was ever so.' Thank goodness I shan't have to be here much longer. On Monday we start up the coast. In another month I'll be back, and then I'm coming east, uncle or no uncle! I have absorbed enough atmosphere and assimilated impressions sufficient to satisfy a cannibal.

"We start up the coast next week, in a tug called the *Shuswap*. According to Macgregor, it is a fine name, and 'Byordinar' lucky.' No one, he assures me, has ever been lost off a *Shuswap*. No *Shuswap* has ever been wrecked, but all have come to a natural end in their beds, or, to be more exact, their scrap-iron

heap. All names are either lucky or unlucky, it seems, some much more so. For instance, there are some names which simply fly in the face of Providence, and are disciplined accordingly. There is in the harbour now a trim-looking yacht, with shining brass and dainty cabin; it is rumoured that she carries silver plate and hand-embroidered linen. But no one will buy her because her name is *The Davy Jones*. Already she has sent two successive owners to join her namesake in the 'Locker.' Macgregor seems to think that it served them right. I suggested that the name be changed, but he shook his head. 'I doubt if there's paint made thick enough to hide a name like yon!' he said. Then he told me tales until I declare he made me wonder if there might not be something in a name, the immortal Bill to the contrary notwithstanding!

"Last Sunday we took out a picnic party on the *Shuswap*. There were Miss Jane and Miss Marian and pretty little Miss O'Hara (and don't forget the O'). For men we had Mr. Rickman and Mr. Macdougall (whose folks in Scotland have a real live piper to assist digestion, and who is revered accordingly), Mr. Macgregor and myself. I had an instinct that I was supposed to devote myself to Miss O'Hara, and I did. I don't think it was my fault that I happened to be devoting myself to her in the bow when a big wave came over and soaked us both. It was entirely Rickman's fault for insisting on steering through the tide-rip in the Narrows without knowing his business! It also was not by any want of devotion on my part that there were no curling-tongs on board. I scarcely see how Macgregor and I could have foreseen their necessity, but it is certain that Miss O'Hara appeared to blame me for the whole catastrophe.

"But this was the only unpleasant incident of the day, and even it was not without its good effect. Macgregor, who was gloomy, as, in spite of himself, he felt uneasy about going 'pleasuring' on the Sabbath, quite cheered up after it. He seemed to think that we had got what was coming to us, and could now call quits.

"Vancouver is very American in taking its Sunday lightly. That morning the Narrows were quite gay with bobbing pleasure craft of all kinds: launches, excursion steamers, yachts, and little row-boats with a single sail. Even the water was unruly. But when we had steamed into Howe Sound Sunday came upon us unawares. It is a wonderful stretch of water, walled in by mountains, dotted with quiet islands. I don't know where all the dancing little pleasure boats went, but in half an hour we had lost them all. Five minutes more and Macgregor and Macdougall were arguing predestination; Marian and Mr. Rickman discussed esoteric Christianity as expounded by Mrs. Besant; Jane and I had agreed that whichever died first was to haunt the other, just to prove that it could be done, and little Miss O'Hara had accepted the fact of no curling-tongs with a beautiful and Christian resignation.

"Later on we quoted poetry, though when it came to my turn I could think of nothing save

" 'Far and few, far and few are the lands where the jumbles live,

 Their heads are green and their hands are blue, and they
 went to sea in a sieve !'

"Miss O'Hara surprised me by quoting Keats. She does not look like a Keats person. Rickman said he

didn't know any but patriotic pieces, but he knew so many of them that he had no call to feel shy. He informed us in many different ways and at much length that in spite of all temptations to belong to other nations he remains an Englishman. And then Macdougall told us about the 'flowers o' the forest which are a' weed awa'.' (Don't know what it means!)

"By this time we were all horribly hungry, so we took the *Shuswap* into a place where a single house is perched upon the hillside, and partook of soft-boiled eggs and hard-boiled tea with fixings. I never saw anything more peaceful than that place. It had a beach of coloured pebbles and water as clear as if it weren't there, a background of pine and cedar, up and up—and a sunset so gorgeous that Macgregor shook his head at it as being too pronounced for a Sabbath evening. As usual, when every prospect pleases, only man was vile. The owner of the house was grumpy. He did not appreciate the peace of his surroundings at all, and complained bitterly that things were more lively here before he lost his licence.

"Coming home (there were no waves now), Miss O'Hara confided in me that she would like to spend her honeymoon on a tug-boat. Steam, she said, was so soothing after the eternal chug-chug of the launches. (Rickman owns a launch!) I said that I felt sure that Macgregor would loan the *Shuswap* gladly for so laudable a purpose, but the reply did not seem to please her, for she went over and talked to Macdougall about Celtic poetry.

"Have I bored you with all this scribbling? I know that at least I have not said anything that I wanted to say or that I thought I might be able to say. I wanted to tell you all that I really thought on that

peaceful Sunday amid the mountains, but I could not do it. Thoughts seem so pretentious, so pompous, so affected when written down. Are they really so, I wonder, or is it a kind of false shame that keeps us always on the surface, ashamed to speak of deep things, so terribly afraid of provoking a smile?

"When I come east again, and you and I meet (as you have promised), shall we discuss anything and everything save the things about which we think? I can't believe it. You and I could speak without fear of laughter, and we shall guess the other things which lie too deep for words. It seems to me that all my life I have been looking at things wrongly. I have been taking always the easy way. When I see my uncle I am going to tell him so, and show him that, while never lacking in gratitude to him, I must not be a slave even to gratitude. This will be Greek to you, but I shall find words to make you understand when I see you."

Christine laid down the letter with a quick little catch of the breath. The broad man who had protected her from observation had gone, and she was already one full block past the Stores corner. But it didn't matter. It wouldn't matter even if she were late. Nothing mattered! When she tied on her scissors and took her place at the counter more than one of the girls looked curiously at the brightness on her face.

CHAPTER XXII

THE STORES TRIUMPHANT

IF Adam Torrance had neglected the Stores in the past, if he had put them aside carelessly as a thing of small import which he steadily declined to perceive within his mental horizon, it is certain that in these days the Stores took a full and fine revenge. From being an incident of mere financial importance, they became a haunting nightmare; from being below the horizon altogether, they suddenly loomed large and threatening, shutting out the view; from being nothing, they became all! It is not an exaggeration to say that he thought of them all day and dreamed of them all night. He could not bear to go near them; he could not bear to stay away; he hated to look at a shop-girl's face, but it was agony not to scan each one eagerly. It speaks well for him that his work lacked nothing in efficiency, and that he never spoke of the tortures he endured. Naturally, he was always fancying likenesses, and that was almost insupportable. Once he saw a girl's face, coarse-lipped, black-browed, which looked at him, it seemed, with the very eyes of an aunt of his, an aunt whose very name had been stricken from the family annals. What if—such things are not impossible! He lived in hell until it was proved beyond all dispute that this black-browed girl was really the daughter of her black-browed parents. Then there was

little Miss Ellis, an adopted child, in whose white face and timid eyes he thought he could trace a likeness to his dead wife. He was greatly drawn to this girl, and when he found out beyond doubt that she was the daughter of a sister of good Mrs. Ellis, who had adopted her, his despair deepened.

Meanwhile the sifting went on rapidly. Johnson and his trained assistants worked almost night and day. Mark had been telegraphed for, and might be expected now any day. But not a single clue led anywhere.

Christine often saw Mr. Torrance in those days, and wondered at his white and drawn face and at the keen and yet furtive look in his eyes, eyes that seemed always searching and yet fearing what they might find. And he often saw her, too, and every time was pierced anew by her strange and haunting resemblance—another trick of imagination, he supposed, yet a most persistent one. And often he thought what a disappointment would have been his had he not seen her in her own home before the search was started and known her for whom she was.

So strange are the things which really happen that, of all the girls in Angers' Stores, the Misses Brown were the only ones who escaped the vigilance of Mr. Johnson and his half-frantic employer; and this simply because the human mind is remarkably tenacious of a suggestion received in good faith. This is why it did not occur to Mr. Johnson, trained to suspicion as he was, that Mr. Torrance did not know what he was talking about when he told him that the Misses Brown were outside the scope of the inquiries. It never occurred to him to waste time on anyone so well vouched for. And, stranger still, it did not occur to

Mr. Torrance himself that he really knew nothing about the Browns. He had called there, he had seen them, he had gathered from their conversation that they were sisters, and the idea of sifting this statement never for a moment obtruded itself. Another reason for this negligence was the secrecy of the investigation. Outside the searchers there was no one who possessed more than the most vague idea that a search was being made. One day one of the girls at the ribbon counter laughingly asked Christine if she were a foundling, adding that foundlings seemed to be at a premium nowadays, for she had heard that someone was looking for a missing heiress. Christine had replied lightly that she was nothing so interesting, and it so happened that Mr. and Mrs. Flynn, the only two now in the Stores who might have contradicted her, heard nothing at all of the investigation, for the simple reason that they had no children to investigate.

Meanwhile the offer of the reward for information as to the person who had brought the letter had also ended in a blind alley. The letter-bringer might have been invisible for all the trace that had been left to guide anyone. Barefaced efforts to obtain the money by false information were, of course, frequent, but of any real clue there was not a vestige. And, as days went by without result, another anxiety was added by the non-appearance of Mark. This could have been explained quite simply, for, as Mark's impatience had insisted upon starting the *Shuswap* on her voyage before the schedule time, and as the Misses Macgregor were not in town, the telegram was still following the travellers.

It must have been a fortnight after Christine's return to the Stores that the most promising clue was un-

earthed. It was found that in Mr. Torrance's own store there had been employed, until within a couple of months, a young girl of sixteen or thereabouts who was known to have been adopted under peculiar circumstances. The girl's name was Alma Stone. Her adopted parents were dead, and the girl had supported herself for some little time. No one knew where she was now, and the inquiry seemed to be threatened with another blank wall until someone remembered that if anyone would know anything about Alma Stone that person would be Miss Celia Brown. Christine, on being questioned, remembered having heard her sister mention the girl's name, and stated that Celia was so far better that it would do her no harm to be interrogated.

It must be said that the detective was rather surprised at the eagerness with which Mr. Torrance himself elected to visit the Misses Brown. He would have preferred to have attended to this promising clue himself, but, as employers' wishes are paramount, he had to be contented with providing the interviewer with as full a list of questions as his professional mind could compass.

It was a dreary day that had been chosen for the interview. The glory of the autumn was almost dead, and vicious, slanting rain pelted the dying leaves from the trees, and the heavy feet of passers-by printed their frail ghosts upon the muddy pavement. Brook Street under such conditions was not lovely. The rain seemed never to clean anything here, but only to add to the dirt and dreariness. Even the children looked dirtier and less cheerful, and Ada's garden was more than ever an abomination of desolation.

Celia, who had been warned of the coming visitor,

was lying propped with pillows upon the couch, her tired eyes watching the steady beating of the rain. Celia did not get well as rapidly as they had hoped. There were times when they almost feared to realise how slow her progress was. "Want of recuperative power," said the doctor; but, after all, that is only another way of saying want of the will to live. People who feel that life has cheated them are chary of taking up the cards again; they would often rather slip out of the game.

To Mr. Torrance the little room seemed a haven of peace. So little do we see into each other's lives that he mistook Celia's despair for the lassitude of convalescence, and envied her her quiet sofa and the soft ministrations of the blind girl. How lovely Ada Brown was, he thought again. Impossible to believe that those beautiful eyes were sightless! As he watched her eager pleasure in the flowers he had brought, a sense of relief to which he had long been a stranger came over him. The awful strain slackened; desperate and cruel things seemed so far away from this simple room.

Celia, who for sixteen years had wondered so often what Mr. Torrance might be like, now looked at him without interest. He was part of life. But he only saw the quiet courtesy of her greeting, noticed that she still seemed very weak, and hoped that his questions would not tire her.

She answered him that she was quite able to help him with any information which she might have, and that talking did not tire her at all.

"I want to ask you, Miss Brown," began Mr. Torrance, "whether you remember a girl called Alma Stone, and if you can tell us where she went when she

left—er—my employment? I may say that my inquiries are entirely for the young lady's benefit—in short, and not to make a mystery, we have learned that she is an adopted child, and it is believed—that it is possible—that we may be able to restore her to”—he hesitated —“to—her home.”

Ada looked up with quick interest. How good he was, she thought. How kind of him to take such an interest in the Stores. His kindness to Christine had been only the beginning. Even Celia brightened a little as her naturally generous nature realised the prospect of good fortune for a friend.

“I knew Alma quite well,” she told him, “though I cannot tell you where she is. Surely it ought to be an easy matter to trace her, but as she often confided in me, perhaps I may be able to tell you some things you wish to know. It is quite true that Alma was adopted when a baby by Mrs. Stone, and she never knew who her real parents were.”

“Ah!” The exclamation was almost a gasp, and both girls looked up. Celia noticed that her visitor's face was very pale.

“Pardon me. You see, this inquiry is a very important thing. The finding of this young girl means a great deal—to me. I think I am hardly myself when I speak of it. Will you continue, Miss Brown?”

Celia was now thoroughly interested; for the first time since her breakdown she tried to sit up straighter of her own free will. “I think I can tell you all that Alma knows herself,” she went on. “She often spoke of it, for, though Mr. and Mrs. Stone were very good to her, Alma had the idea that she was—that they were—well, not as high in the social scale as her own parents.”

"I don't like that," said Mr. Torrance uneasily. "It sounds rather——"

"Snobbish? Yes. But girls will romance about a mystery. Alma is not really snobbish. And, you see, even Mr. and Mrs. Stone knew nothing of Alma's parentage, and they rather encouraged her in imagining things. It lent colour, I think, to all their lives. Mr. Stone was a country clergyman, and Alma was left at his door when she was a baby about—well, just cutting her first teeth."

Mr. Torrance wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"As far as she can guess she is now about eighteen years old."

"Eighteen? Are you sure of that?"

"Yes—Alma has often told me. It was eighteen years ago, and just before Christmas, that she was deserted on the Stones' doorstep. Ada, dear, get Mr. Torrance a glass of water."

"Thank you, I do not need it. I am ashamed of myself. These inquiries unnerve me. I think I shall leave the more serious inquiries to an agent after this. I used to pride myself upon my self-control, but, you see, I have none. When you began your story I thought we might have at last come upon the right clue. But the young lady's age proves differently. If you are sure of the eighteen years, it practically settles the matter. We shall not drop the case, of course, until we are quite sure, but what you have told me is fairly conclusive. She can scarcely be the young girl for whom we are looking."

"I am sorry," said Celia, "for she had a hard life since her adopted parents died. She could not stand the work in the Stores, and had to give it up. I do

not know where she went. I ought to have kept in touch with her, but I was not well myself, and at night I was always so tired." She sighed. "She was a dear little girl."

"Well, we shall find her, and see that she is taken care of."

Celia looked up with a touch of her old bright shrewdness. "If you are going to father the Stores, you will have a large family, Mr. Torrance," she said.

"I know that," he answered soberly; "and a month ago the idea appalled me. Now it seems an easy thing. If only—if only this other anxiety were lifted, I think I could father all the world and not feel the burden heavy."

When he had gone the blind girl left her knitting and came over to the sofa where Celia lay. For a moment the two clasped hands without speech, as they often did, and then Ada said softly:

"Oh, grandma, what great eyes you have!"

It was the old childish formula with which Celia had taught her to ask when she was a little child for information which her lack of sight shut out.

"The better to see with, my dear," answered Celia, smiling. "What is it, dear? Mr. Torrance?"

The blind girl nodded.

"Well, I think you would like his looks, Ada. He is tall but not stiff. His face is pleasant, even handsome. His eyes are dark, and his hair also, except for a dash of grey at the temples. It is a distinguished face, straight nose, firm mouth. He looks very pale and worried just now."

"I wonder why?"

"I don't know," listlessly; "about the search, perhaps. His interest seemed very keen."

"Isn't it odd," mused Ada, "that since we adopted Christine we have always been hearing of other people who have done the same thing—adopted a baby, I mean? Sometimes it seems as if half the world were adopted!"

"It is on the same principle that when you go to have a tooth out, all the world appears to be at the dentist's. We notice more the things which interest us, that's all. I wish you wouldn't talk of it, Ada. Christine is our own—she was never anything else."

The blind girl nodded. "Yes, I feel like that. Of course, Christine is different. Do you suppose they will find Alma? It is odd that Mr. Torrance should be so worried. In any case, the lost child could not be anything to him. Tommy says he has no children."

For the second time that day Celia raised herself out of her cushions. A soft red of excitement glowed in her cheeks. "Why, how stupid of me! Of course he had a child. I remember long ago hearing about it, long before anyone knew that he was the owner of the Stores. He had a baby. Why, I remember it all now—it was kidnapped!"

The girls' hands clasped tighter.

"How strange!" said Ada. "Oh, Celia, what if he were looking for his own daughter?"

"If he were, that would explain why he looked as he did—like a man under torture."

"Oh, Celia, how dreadful he must have felt!"

Celia had gone very pale. "I am glad I did not tell him quite all I knew about poor Alma," she said.

CHAPTER XXIII

CHRISTINE DISAPPEARS

ONE wonders what psychological fact lies back of such commonplaces as "It never rains but it pours" and "Troubles never come singly." Is there, indeed, a power in trouble to attract trouble? Has sorrow some sad affinity for sorrow? Or is it all just chance that joy so often comes to the joyful and grief to those already stricken? To Adam Torrance, making his way slowly home from Brook Street, it seemed that he at least was safe from new calamity. Fate had surely expended all the slings and arrows that the most outrageous fortune might demand. Things would brighten soon; Johnson would find a clue, Mark would soon be home. This nightmare of uncertainty and suspense must end before long. He heard the newsboys calling "Extra!" as he went along, but so sure was he of the safeguard of his own misery that he did not even glance at the paper.

As he entered the hall of his own home Benson, the solemn butler, came forward with something like anxiety upon his well-trained face. "What is it, Benson?" The question was uninterested.

"Mr. Mark is here, sir. He arrived on the afternoon train, sir."

"Mark! That's good news——"

"Excuse me, sir, Mr. Mark has had a little accident,

sir. He has been hurt. Not seriously, we hope, sir. We tried to get you everywhere on the 'phone."

Fortune had evidently not finished with Adam Torrance yet. "Mark hurt!" he repeated in a dazed way.

"Not seriously, sir, we hope. The doctors are with him at present. Miss Torrance——"

"Come in here, Adam!" sounded the unmistakable voice of Miss Torrance from the library. "You can't go up to the boy yet. The doctors are making an examination."

Mr. Torrance handed his hat to the butler and went slowly into the library. After the sharp shock of the news about Mark the presence of Aunt Miriam seemed a minor wonder.

"There's nothing to look so white about," said that lady sharply. "The boy isn't dead! He'll be as good as ever in a week or so."

"How did it happen?"

"Goodness knows—or the street railway company! Didn't you hear about the accident? The newsboys have been shouting it for the last hour. A street car collision; no one killed."

"And Mark?"

"Not seriously hurt, the doctors say—not that they know anything about it. Benson telephoned me, said he couldn't get you anywhere. I suppose you are wondering how I got here? It just goes to prove what I said all along, that I am not such an entire invalid as it suits the doctors to suppose. My place was here, and I came."

Mr. Torrance smiled faintly. "You were always wonderful, Miriam," he said.

"What puzzles me," continued Miss Torrance, "is

how Mark happened to be in the car at all. Why didn't he telephone for the motor? Although I suppose that if he had done so the motor would have exploded. I am not a fatalist, but I believe in fate in those cases. And why weren't you at the station to meet him? Didn't you know that he was coming home to-day?"

"No; he did not telegraph. I expected him any time."

"That's odd. Adam, is there anything between you and Mark? Any—unpleasantness—over that letter of mine?"

"No, nothing. Mark knew nothing about it."

The little old lady gave a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness! I was beginning to imagine things. It is against my principles to interfere in other people's business. I wrote that letter in spite of my principles, and I am surprised that I did not do more harm. I am not a pessimist, but I suppose the trouble is yet to come."

"There will be no trouble. Mark would not quarrel with me for the sake of a girl."

Miss Torrance closed her eyes. "No one has ever quarrelled with anyone for the sake of a girl, of course," she said sarcastically. "The question is—— Hush! I hear the doctors coming."

The quick ears of the invalid were not mistaken, for there was a murmur of voices upon the stair, and next moment the two doctors entered the library. Their faces were grave, but not, as the anxious watchers were quick to note, sombre.

"He will do well, I think," said the elder doctor, shaking Mr. Torrance's hand. "The broken arm is a simple matter, and the injury to the head is not of so

serious a nature as we at first supposed. In fact, I think we may relieve you of all anxiety."

"That is good news indeed," said Adam Torrance. "You say there is an injury to the head?"

"Yes; but you must not let it alarm you. There will be delirium. Try to keep his mind at ease. If he has any fancies, gratify them. He must not excite himself. Otherwise there is really no cause for anxiety. The nurse has arrived, and knows her duties."

Miss Torrance sniffed audibly. She did not approve of nurses.

"If the patient appears to worry, she will let you know at once," went on the doctor, "although I think it unlikely. So fortunate a young man is not likely to have many ungratified fancies."

"Think so?" snapped Miss Torrance. "That just shows how little you doctors know. Mark is just as likely as the rest of us to want something that he can't have." She threw a slightly malicious glance in the direction of her brother, who calmly ignored it.

"Well, well," said the doctor, smiling, "we will hope not. People with broken heads must be indulged. A deplorable affair this accident, Mr. Torrance. This street railway company is the curse of our city. Their negligence of the most elementary precautions is notorious. Shameful!"

"I am afraid we do not think of it save when our own suffer," said Mr. Torrance. "I must confess to the common failing. Is the boy conscious yet? Might I—will it be possible to see him soon?"

Dr. Mackenzie looked at his colleague, who nodded solemnly.

"Perhaps for a few moments," he decided. "But do not allow him to talk. He may know you or he may

not. In the latter event, do not show alarm. It is a natural consequence of his present state. The nurse will be present—a most capable woman. I shall call again later. Miss Torrance, if I may have the honour of driving you safely home——”

“Thank you, doctor. No, I shall stay here. My maid can make me comfortable, or, if not, then I shall have to be uncomfortable. I do not budge until Mark is better.”

“Wonderful!” exclaimed the doctor. “Your spirit is wonderful, my dear Miss Torrance. I only hope your body may not suffer for it afterwards.”

“My dear man, don’t fuss! You know I cannot stand fuss. If you miss your daily call at Amberley Avenue, go and call on Jane. She has been eating too much sweetstuff, and thinks she is getting the measles.” She waved him away with quick gestures of her transparent hands, and the big doctor accepted his dismissal with good grace.

“Miriam,” said her brother, “it is like you to want to stay, but if it will injure your health——”

“It cannot injure what I haven’t got; and I am going to stay. Give me your arm, Adam. I want to go and see the boy. I must get a look at that nurse. I don’t believe in nurses. Never saw one yet who didn’t need more waiting on than the patient. I hope you have plenty of servants. With a nurse to do for, one might just as well prepare to entertain royalty.” And, grumbling in a voice which she tried in vain to render subdued, she toiled up the wide and shallow staircase, leaning upon her brother’s arm. The nurse (who might easily have heard the remarks upon her possible character) met them at the door, and motioned her into silence.

Mark was lying upon the bed. Such a strange Mark, with bandaged arm and white-swathed head and restless eyes, bright with fever. Mr. Torrance thought with quick concern that even without the bandages he looked thinner and older than when he went away. There was a peculiar odour also in the room, an odour which recalled to him with strange vividness the room in which his wife had died. He shuddered.

"Pshaw!" said Aunt Miriam. "It's only antiseptics!"

"Hush!" The nurse raised a protesting finger, but the patient on the bed laughed weakly.

"Hullo, auntie!" he said; but his eyes wandered past his adopted father unseeingly.

"Mark!" said Mr. Torrance.

"I can't attend to you just now, Mr. Macgregor," said Mark, in a matter of fact tone. "I want to talk to auntie."

"Don't you know me, Mark?"

"Certainly, Macgregor. I'd know you anywhere. But don't bother me. I'm not going any farther with you this trip. I'm wanted at home."

"But, dear boy——"

"Don't argue with him," warned the nurse.

Again the sick man's fancy veered. He looked up into his uncle's face with a mischievous smile.

"Sly old auntie!" he whispered. "Weren't you afraid to tell that fib?"

Adam Torrance drew back with a sigh. "He doesn't know me at all," he said. "You try, Miriam."

The little old lady bent tremulously over him.

"Do you know me, Mark?"

Her voice seemed to touch a train of memory. "Did

you bring her?" he asked anxiously. "You had her, you know. Where is she?"

"You are exciting the patient," said the nurse coldly. Miss Torrance waved her away.

"Who is it you want me to bring, Mark?"

But he had lost the thread again. "I want a bun," he said. "No, not a bun, a red wagon—no, that doesn't sound right. How funny!" He began to laugh weakly.

"I must ask you to leave the patient now," interposed the nurse. "Excitement is bad for him."

"If he wants anything he ought to get it. The doctor said so," declared Aunt Miriam stubbornly.

"Certainly—if you know what it is he wants. I presume," with a little prim smile, "that it is not a bun or a red wagon."

"I used to give him buns when he was a child," said the old lady, with a suspicious choke.

Suddenly the unbandaged arm on the bed shot out, and Mark's hand grasped hers convulsively. For a moment his eyes seemed clear. "Auntie! did you bring her?"

"Say 'Yes,'" commanded the nurse.

"Yes, certainly," said Aunt Miriam. "Go to sleep."

A faint smile spread over the invalid's face. "Good old auntie!" he said. But as she bent over him to say good-night he did not know her. Calling her Miss O'Hara, he warned her not to forget the "O."

The nurse motioned them both away peremptorily, and, following them into the next room, closed the door.

"He is showing more excitement than the doctors expected," she said thoughtfully. "It will be well to quiet him if we can. Perhaps it would be possible to

have the young lady in the house in case he frets for her again?"

"What young lady?" asked Miss Torrance sharply. The nurse seemed mildly surprised.

"The one he asked for," she replied. "I presumed that you would know."

"I don't know. I have no idea. I know of no one whom he could possibly want. Do you, Adam?"

Mr. Torrance shook his head.

"Then it is someone whom you don't know," concluded the nurse placidly.

The brother and sister exchanged a quick and guilty look, a look which the nurse saw and interpreted in her own way. "It may not be absolutely necessary to send for her," she said practically. "Perhaps I can quiet him. I'll try." She disappeared into the patient's room.

"What impudence!" snapped Aunt Miriam.

"What did she mean?" asked Adam Torrance. "Did she think that we were deliberately——"

"Lying? Yes, she did. She evidently thinks that we know of someone whom Mark—— Do you suppose he might be wanting to see Alice Van Slyke, Adam?"

"No. In fact, I may say that I am quite sure that it is not Miss Van Slyke. He told me as much before he went away."

"Perhaps he has met someone in Vancouver," suggested Miss Torrance nervously.

"Perhaps—I don't know."

They exchanged another guilty look, and then Aunt Miriam gave in.

"I am afraid you do know," she said ruefully. "I am afraid we both know that he does not want anyone in Vancouver."

"You think it is——"

"I am quite sure it is."

"You are sure he was really taken with Miss—
er——"

"Brown? Yes, Adam, I'm afraid I'm sure."

Adam Torrance sighed, but he was not the man to remain undecided in such an emergency. "Then we must send for Miss Brown," he said dryly.

"Do you know where to send, Adam?"

"No," still more dryly, "but I shouldn't be at all surprised if you do."

Miss Torrance had the face to blush. "Well," she declared, "perhaps it's lucky for us all that I do know. I thought I was a sentimental fool for taking the girl's address, but she interested me. I'm sure the address was enough to frighten anyone. She lives in Brook Street—actually! Number 1620, I think, Room 26—fancy living in a room with a number!"

"Brook Street!" exclaimed Mr. Torrance. "You can't mean Brook Street? Why, it is in Brook Street that some of my employees live. I was there this afternoon. Those other Miss Browns of whom I told you live there. It can't be the same? You said yourself they were not the same. You remember? When I asked you if she worked in the Stores, you said 'No.'" Mr. Torrance's excitement was making him slightly incoherent.

"She didn't work in any store—when I saw her," said Miss Torrance. Her brother eyed her sternly. "But she may have afterwards. How was I to know?"

"The young lady of whom I spoke to you," said Mr. Torrance, "was called Christine."

Aunt Miriam tried to look surprised. "How very

strange! I believe that the young lady of whom I spoke to you was called Christine also."

The opening of the door interrupted his answer. "Excuse me, Mr. Torrance," said the nurse, "but the patient is very restless. The lady he seems to wish to see is called Christine. I don't know——"

"Thank you, nurse. I think that is all that is necessary. She shall be sent for."

"You need not look like that," said Miss Torrance, recovering. "I really did not know whether the Miss Brown in whom you were interested was the same Miss Brown in whom Mark—was interested. I may have suspected. But it was quite true that when I saw her she did not work in any store. And you said yourself that you wished to consider her case without prejudice."

"I am not blaming you, Miriam. It is probably as well that I did not know—I can hardly realise it now that I do know. It seems too fantastic. I feel like a child who has frightened itself with a bogie which never existed."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning the other Miss Brown! I may as well say at once," he went on simply, "that if Mark is in love with Miss Christine, I can wish him happiness. She is as sweet as she is beautiful, and, Miriam, whatever her name may be, she is a lady."

"Hoity toity!" said Miss Miriam. "Whoever said she wasn't?"

Mr. Torrance's grave face brightened. One threatened calamity had not turned out so badly after all. One cloud had already cleared, and the bogie of Miss Brown had vanished for ever. In her place stood Christine! He wondered why the mere thought of her made his heart feel warm.

"Do you think she will come?" he asked.

Miss Miriam thought that she would. Even if she did not care at all for Mark, she would probably not refuse to see him.

But fate, tireless in concocting evil, had still another blow in store, for when the automobile returned she did not come. Instead there was ~~Ada~~, very pale, her poor eyes red with tears, and Tommy, with bad news in every line of his anxious face.

Christine, they said, was gone. She had not come home as usual from the Stores. She had sent no word. She was not with any of their few friends. Christine had disappeared!

CHAPTER XXIV

WHERE IS SHE ?

"BUT where is she?"

Even as he spoke Adam Torrance realised the foolishness of his words. Tommy's stern face and Ada's tears were eloquent of that answered question.

"She can't possibly be really gone, you know," said Aunt Miriam. "She may very well have a friend of whom you have not thought. It is not late yet. She may have had dinner somewhere and gone on to the theatre."

Ada gave a half-hysterical laugh. "Oh, no," she said. "You do not understand. One does not have dinner and go on to the theatre—in Brook Street!"

"We have been searching since half-past six o'clock," said Tommy. "Were there any natural explanation of her absence, we should have found her long ago."

"But, my dear Mr.——"

"Burns," said Tommy.

"My dear Mr. Burns, what can possibly have happened?"

"We do not know. When this message from Mr. Torrance came we thought at first that it brought us news, but as it was only a request for her to come here, we thought it wise to come and tell you."

"We thought," said Ada softly, "that you might be able to help us."

"We shall certainly do that," said Mr. Torrance; and, to give his assurance greater weight, he drew his chair closer to hers and let his firm hand rest a moment upon her trembling one. "There must be a very simple explanation somewhere; but it may need a trained mind to find it. Fortunately, the very man we need is in the house—or should be." He rang the bell, and when the butler appeared, "Benson, is Mr. Johnson here yet?"

"Yes, sir. He said he had an appointment, sir. He is in the small reception room."

"Ask him to kindly step this way."

"You see," he explained to his puzzled guests, "I am engaged at present in a search myself, and this is the hour at which Mr. Johnson makes his report. If we tell him your difficulty——"

"Oh!" Ada drew a deep breath of relief, but Tommy's face grew more troubled.

"Must it be made public?" he asked uneasily. The blind girl's sightless eyes turned to him in surprise. "Why not?" she asked. There was something in the simple question which made the blood rush into Tommy's round face. "Only that publicity is not pleasant," he answered stiffly.

"But it need not be made public at all," Mr. Torrance answered them. "Mr. Johnson is a private detective, and——"

"Mr. Johnson, sir," announced Benson, throwing open the door.

The big detective surveyed the agitated group with a benevolent air, and the effect of his entrance was not unlike that of a doctor into a sick-room. He brought confidence into the midst of fear. True, he was only a

man with a brain like other men's, and no abnormal faculty for the solving of mysteries, but his strength lay in the fact that mystery did not appal him or rob him of his confidence. He lived, as it were, on mystery, and long familiarity had, as usual, bred contempt. This serene being listened to Ada's faltering story with an air encouragingly blasé. He did not falter into surprised and purposeless questioning, like Mr. Torrance, nor did he suggest dinner and theatres, like Mr. Torrance's bewildered sister; instead, he merely said "Ah!" and one felt immediately that this was the acme of wisdom.

"We will, first of all, get the facts," said he, briskly producing a serviceable notebook. Ada, who had just finished telling her story, looked slightly bewildered, and Mr. Torrance interposed with:

"I think that Miss Brown has already told you all she knows."

The detective smiled. "And also a great deal that she does not know," he agreed blandly. "When one knows very little, one naturally theorises a great deal. But at this stage theorising will not help us. We must get nothing but facts. Therefore, you will excuse me if I put a few questions.

"How long has your sister been employed by Angers and Son?"

Ada gave the required dates, and they were duly recorded in the notebook.

"Her age?"

"Sixteen—or thereabouts."

"Or thereabouts?" in surprise.

Poor Ada blushed. "I am not absolutely sure within a few months," she faltered.

"Surely a month or two does not matter, Johnson?" Mr. Torrance's tone was impatient.

"Perhaps not, in this case; but in some cases even a day or two might make every difference. Well, then, was the young lady pretty, homely, or—just ordinary?"

"I can answer that," said Miss Torrance. "Miss Brown was far more than merely pretty; she was, in fact, unusually lovely."

"Ah!" said the detective. Tommy moved uneasily.

"In what part of the Stores did her work lie?"

"At the ribbon counter."

"That is the counter just opposite the main entrance?"

"Yes."

"Had she ever, within the last few weeks or months, spoken of going away anywhere?"

"No."

"Where would she be likely to visit had she had such a holiday in view?"

"Nowhere—really, there is nowhere. We know so few people—none whom Christine would be likely to care to visit."

"No school friend?"

"Christine had school friends, but she never went to their homes, because they might not have cared to come to ours."

"How about relations?"

"We are absolutely alone."

"And I understand you to say that you have already inquired at every place where you think she might possibly have gone?"

"Every place."

"And now, pardon me, but you know one must have no secrets from a detective: was there a young man in the case?"

"Oh!" Ada's exclamation was a gasp. "Certainly not," she added with dignity.

The detective made a note and then looked up. This time he looked at Tommy, who was very red. "You had better speak out if you know anything," he advised him.

"I? Why, I can't—I—I don't know anything!" stuttered poor Tommy.

"Oh," said the detective, with a meaning glance. "Well, see you later. In the meantime——" But Ada's voice broke in sharply:

"Tommy—what is it? Oh, Tommy, do you know anything you haven't told?"

"Might just as well tell it now," nodded the detective.

"It isn't much," said the miserable Tommy, "and it can't have anything to do with her disappearance, but she told me the other day that a man had spoken to her in the street."

"Oh," gasped Ada.

"What impudence!" said Aunt Miriam.

The detective only smiled. "It probably meant just nothing at all—or she wouldn't have mentioned it," he said comfortably. "Did she happen to say who the friendly person was?"

"No, she did not."

"Do you know of any other time when she was spoken to upon the street?"

"No—that is——"

"May as well tell it all."

"Well, then, once I met her talking to a—friend."

"Gentleman friend?"

"A gentleman—yes."

"Oh, Tommy!" There was heart-break in Ada's voice.

"Do you know who that young man was?"

"Yes. He was a piano agent. He seemed"—grudgingly—"a nice fellow. They had met by accident. She intended presenting him to her sisters, but he was unexpectedly compelled to go away."

"Did they correspond?"

"I believe there was a letter—or two." Tommy did not look at Ada as he said this.

"Ah, now we are getting it! There is at least one possible place where the young lady may be. Don't feel upset, miss," to Ada, "lots of runaway matches turn out well! I give you my word for it. If Mr. Burns can remember the young man's name——"

"But I can't! I only heard it the once—or, stay! I remember being surprised because it was like another name. Now I have it! His name was Wareham."

"A piano-man with a name like Mark!" exclaimed Miss Torrance.

"I don't see how——" hesitated Mr. Torrance.

"Well, I don't see just how either," beamed the detective, "but I think we may take it for granted that we have our hands upon the mystery. Find this Mr. Wareham, piano agent, and we probably find the missing lady. Bless you, miss, matches like this are common as gooseberries in our business, and very well they turn out—remarkably well, I assure you."

"But," began Mr. Torrance again. "Suppose there is a flaw in your reasoning? Suppose I happen to know where this Mr. Wareham is and can assure you that the lady is not with him?"

"Do you mean that you can assure me of that?" in astonishment.

"Yes, absolutely."

"Then," said Tommy, springing to his feet, "I want more than an assurance. I demand to know where this man is."

"He is upstairs in this house. A victim of this afternoon's accident." Mr. Torrance turned quietly to his sister. "I think you agree with me, Miriam, that the Mr. Wareham whom Mr. Burns saw talking to Miss Christine could have been no other than Mark?"

"Must have been," said Aunt Mirian. "It is not a common name. Fancy, Mark, a piano-man!"

"But—he went away," said Tommy.

"Yes. My nephew has been absent at the coast for some time. We knew before he left that he was interested in a Miss Brown. He returned this afternoon, with the result that I have mentioned. It was to quiet him that we sent for Miss Christine to come here to-night."

Tommy sat down again. The puzzled look upon his good-natured face was almost funny. "Then," he said helplessly, "where is she?"

The detective was watching him narrowly.

"I take it, Mr. Burns," he remarked briskly, "that although you had said nothing, you had yourself entertained the idea that the young lady might have run away with Mr. Wareham?"

"He had done nothing of the kind," declared Ada loyally. "Mr. Burns knows Christine as well as we do, and he knows that such a thing would have been impossible. Tell them so, Tommy."

"Certainly. It would have been impossible. It was only in the absolute lack of anything whatever to go upon that I thought of Mr. Wareham at all. Had I not been too anxious to think clearly, I would have

known that he could know as little about this mystery as any of us. I did not know that Mr. Wareham was anything save what he professed to be—a piano agent—but I believed him to be an honourable man. Even had I known that he had met Christine under false pretences, I know Christine well enough to——”

“We understand, I am sure,” interposed the detective, cutting short Tommy’s halting explanation. “In the face of a disappearance like this, everything, however unlikely, must be considered. But in this case we were evidently upon the wrong scent. We must reconstruct our ideas entirely. I wonder, Miss Brown, if you have noticed anything at all peculiar in your sister’s manner of late? Has she seemed at all—er—different?”

Ada hesitated. “Hardly different,” she answered. “She has been a little more quiet, more self-contained—she seemed a little older; but I think that is all naturally accounted for by her increased responsibilities since my eldest sister’s illness.”

“Just so. But has she seemed to be at all worried about anything?”

“I do not think so.”

“Think well, now, both of you—and try to remember if she has ever said anything, however trivial, about any kind of outside worry. There must be something, you know. This disappearance did not happen without a cause.”

They were all silent for a moment or two.

“Try to think,” he urged them, “of anything she may have said about the Stores or of her experiences in going to and from her work there. You said, Mr. Burns, that once she was spoken to by a man

whom she did not know. Did she seem worried by this?"

"No. She joked about it."

"And were there absolutely no other experiences of the same kind?"

"No, except that once an old woman spoke to her." He glanced at Ada, who looked distressed.

"What kind of woman?"

"A beggar. She asked for money."

"Did the young lady give her anything?"

"She had nothing but car tickets."

"And you think she was alarmed?"

"No—o. Only she did not like the beggar's looks."

"U—m. There seems to be nothing in that. The man looks more promising. You say you do not know who he was?"

"I said that she did not tell me who he was. But I found out. I wanted to—warn him. It was Gilbert Van Slyke. He saw her in the Stores, and more than one noticed how—impressed he was. I do not think she knew anything of it herself until the afternoon he spoke to her. I do not think that he would ever have repeated the annoyance. In fact, when I went to see him he was away arranging for a contemplated trip to Europe. I believe he sails from New York in a day or two."

"That is interesting!" The detective sprang up briskly. "If you will all excuse me, I should like to do a little telephoning. Some place where I shall not be disturbed. Shall not be long."

It seemed long to those who waited, and when he returned his face was grave. He glanced uneasily at Ada, who sat very still. "Well," he said, "I've found

out all about Van Slyke. He left for New York to-night on the seven o'clock flyer. There was no lady with him. All the same, I may as well tell you that it is common talk that he did not go alone. He has, I am sorry to have to say it, taken these little trips before. And somehow, in some definite way that I cannot account for, Miss Brown's disappearance has got about. The newspapers have it—they must be silenced at once."

The little group looked at each other with startled faces. But the blind girl rose quietly from her chair.

"Come, Tommy," she said. "We are wasting time here. I am sure, sir," turning to Mr. Johnson, "that you do not desire to insult my sister. I realise that to one who did not know her some such explanation as you have hinted might seem possible; to those who know her it is so impossible as to be preposterous. Mr. Van Slyke could scarcely have kidnapped Christine, and to consider any other possibility is an insult."

She turned with gentle dignity and moved toward the door.

"Quite right," boomed Aunt Miriam. "I declare I think all men are fools! There is more behind this affair than elopement, even if Miss Christine had been of the eloping kind. Adam, what are you staring at? Why don't you do something!"

"Indeed, if Miss Ada will forgive me, that is just what I want to do. Please do not go. You are undoubtedly right. I do not for one moment believe that Miss Christine is responsible for her own disappearance. But the more innocent she is the more would she suffer from a newspaper scandal. I can stop that by the use of 'undue influence,' but the better way would be to prove them on the wrong track. If Mr. Johnson were

to communicate with his men in New York, advising them to shadow Van Slyke, the matter will be disposed of once and for all."

"It is disposed of now, once and for all," said Ada calmly. "I refuse to allow Mr. Johnson to insult my sister by any inquiries in that direction. If he cannot help us in any other way, we must manage to find her ourselves."

"Quite right," declared Aunt Miriam again. "Don't tell me that Miss Brown may be deceived in her sister. It isn't possible to live with any person for sixteen years and not know of what that person is capable—I mean in regard to the big things. So if Miss Ada here is satisfied that you would waste time in tracking Van Slyke, I agree with her. Besides, I have the advantage of having seen Miss Christine herself, and anyone who had done that would have no doubts. There must be another explanation somewhere."

Ada, who was still standing, thanked her with a tremulous smile.

"Very well, you may be right," admitted the detective. "Meanwhile, the story must not get into print. Mr. Torrance, will you use that 'undue influence'? I will begin my inquiries at the other end. Did your sister use the car or did she walk home, Miss Brown?"

"She usually walked."

"Would she walk in the rain?"

"I do not think it would prevent her. She wore her rain-coat."

"Would there be any little errands which she might attend to on her way home?"

"Not to-night. Oh, yes, I remember she was to call at a drug-store."

"For anything particular?"

"No; just some glycerine, rose-water, and carbolic acid."

"A preparation for the hands, is it not?"

"Yes. We make it up ourselves."

"Well, the drug-stores on her route must be visited without delay. We may pick up a valuable clue. If I get anything definite I'll let you know at once. But try not to be impatient. At any rate, I'll report to-morrow night. Shall it be here or at Brook Street?"

"If it could be where Celia could hear——"

"Certainly," said Mr. Torrance. "The report shall be made at Brook Street. And tell Miss Celia not to worry. Everything that can be done shall be done, and done quickly. We are not even sure yet that she is lost. We must have hope——"

"That's it!" declared the big detective genially. "That's the word we need in our business—hope!"

CHAPTER XXV

AFTER SIXTEEN YEARS

NOT until the evening of the next day did Mark's delirium finally leave him. Then, himself once more, he looked up into his uncle's face with a somewhat wry smile. "Here I am," he said weakly. "Somewhat damaged in transit, but still kicking."

Adam Torrance pressed the free hand gently. "Hard luck," he said. "But don't worry. We'll soon have you as right as rain."

Mark nodded. "Yes. I'll patch up quickly. But you wanted me—to help. Your little girl—have you found her?"

"No, not yet. It may be a long search. All our clues have led nowhere. The whole story may be a cruel hoax. You must not think about it. The sooner you are well the sooner you will be able to help. Can you sleep now?"

The invalid's grasp on his hand tightened.

"Yes. But there is something—I can't rest until I have a note sent to explain—to tell someone that I am ill. You'll do it for me, won't you?"

"Certainly. Anything you like. Just a brief note telling of the accident, I suppose? I'll send it at once. What name and address?"

A bewildered look came over the invalid's face. "The name—address?" He raised his hand un-

certainly to his head. "Why—I don't know them. They are gone—I have forgotten!" He returned his uncle's smiling look with one of terrified dismay. "My head! Is there something wrong with my head? Whatever shall I do?"

"It is the effect of the blow, I suppose," said his uncle; "but it will be only a temporary inconvenience—if you do not make yourself worse with worry. Meanwhile, perhaps I can help you. Shall I mention some names?"

A slight flush crept into Mark's pale cheek. "You don't know this name, sir. It is the name of someone you have never met. I want to tell you about it when—I'm stronger."

"Yes. But let me try anyway. It is a lady's name, I presume? Well then, how about Alice Van Slyke?"

Mark moved restlessly. "Oh, no!"

His uncle watched him keenly. "There was a name," he said slowly, "which you mentioned several times while you were delirious. The name was that of Miss Brown—Miss Christine Brown."

Mark sank back upon his pillow with a sigh of relief. "That's it! I remember it all now—the address is 1620 Brook Street. Uncle, I know you will wonder, but if you only trust me until I am a little more myself I will tell you—I can explain——"

"Yes. Don't try to talk now. I know more about it than you think. The main thing is for you to get well. I need you, Mark, and—others—need you, too!" Try as he would, he could not keep the feeling out of his voice. The nurse raised a hand warningly. But already weakness and the satisfaction of having his wish granted had dimmed the sick man's perceptions. He smiled contentedly. "I'll get well—now," he

murmured. Then the nurse came forward to say that he had talked long enough.

"He is rallying splendidly," she told Mr. Torrance when they had left him in a peaceful sleep. "There is a great difference between now and last night. You can see it for yourself. By to-morrow his head ought to be quite clear, and you will find him much stronger."

"Yes. Thank God! He seems almost himself to-night. Will he wake again, do you think? Should he do so and ask for me, tell him that I am delivering the note he wished sent myself. Should he be worse, and I am needed, send for me to No. 1620 Brook Street, Room 26."

If the nurse were surprised at the address, she did not show it, though it might well have occurred to her to wonder what business could take the fastidious Mr. Torrance into such squalid quarters.

As for that gentleman himself, he had almost forgotten to find Bröok Street squalid. He passed through it now without seeing it; so great was the interest of the opening drama which it sheltered that even the House of Windows promptly took its proper place, a stage effect, necessary but unobtrusive. The children still playing in the gathering dusk crowded around him, but he scattered some silver amongst them with an indifferent hand and hurried on up the untidy stair where tragedy had climbed before him. He found the two girls close together in the almost dark room—waiting. Tragedy was there, too; one felt her chill breath in the air and read the sure signs of her presence in the strained eyes and white faces of the sisters.

"No news yet," said Ada.

"Unless you bring us some?" added Celia.

He shook his head. He was surprised at the change

in Celia's voice. When he had heard her speak before, it had been dull, a little hoarse, curiously without life or inflection. Now, although weak, it was clear and natural, charged with deep feeling. Her eyes, too, had changed: they were restless now, full of awakened life; all her unnatural listlessness had gone. The shock of Christine's loss had done what Christine's arguments had failed to do; she had forgotten about the Stores. The lesser calamity had been swallowed up in the greater.

"No. I have no news," said Mr. Torrance, awkwardly assisting the blind girl to light the shaded lamp, "except that Mark is himself again. He was quite conscious when he awoke to-night and was able to ease his mind by giving me the message for Christine which he tried in vain to give last night. I told him that I would see to it. It was impossible to tell him the truth. Poor fellow! But I hope he will never have to face the shock. Christine will be found again before he needs to know that she is lost. Has Johnson sent no word? Then he will be here soon himself, and we shall know all that there is to know."

"Tommy is coming too. He has been searching all day. He blames himself——"

Mr. Johnson's brisk knock at the door interrupted her, and Ada flew to admit him, while Mr. Torrance, mindful of his own experiences, held the lamp that the detective might not stumble more than was necessary.

"Bad stairs, those!" declared the detective, puffing. "How do you do, Miss Brown? Thank you, a little light is a help. How do you do?" he bowed over Celia's couch. "Is Miss Torrance here yet? She declared she was coming—extraordinary woman, if I may say so, Mr. Torrance!"

"My sister will not be here. She is greatly disappointed, but upon learning that there is no elevator—well, even she knows that the stairs would kill her."

"Well, then, we are all here—except Mr. Burns——"

"He is coming now," said Ada; and indeed they could all hear someone taking the stairs three steps at a time. Tommy had no need of light. He knew his way well.

"Ah, now here we all are," went on the detective, as Tommy burst in, very red and breathing heavily. "I did not communicate with you before because I had nothing very definite to tell. But I have some details, very interesting details. First, we begin at the Stores. They knew all about it there! I couldn't tell them anything, so of course they couldn't tell me anything. They are quite sure that Miss Christine has eloped with Van Slyke. All the real information obtainable there was that the young lady left the Stores, looking particularly pretty in a dark blue rain-coat and toque, at exactly five minutes after six o'clock. Van Slyke was observed to be sauntering down the other side of the street. Evidently he wished to have one more look at her before leaving on the seven train for New York. He did not follow her; simply watched her out of sight, and then went off slowly in the opposite direction. One of the clerks saw Miss Christine turn down Market Street, which gives us the course which she probably took in going home. From there we lose track of her until we come to Cunningham's Drug Store, corner of Market and Osborne Streets. As Miss Ada imagined she might, she went in there to purchase some toilet articles. The clerk remembers her well. He says that he has been in the habit of watching her go past, to and from work, because she

was so pretty. For the same reason he inquired and found out who she was. There is no doubt about his identification. (It seems that there must be few young ladies with hair like hers. Everyone notices it!) The druggist sold her some glycerine, rose-water, and carbolic acid. She was certainly in no danger then, for she was not at all agitated, and answered his remarks upon the badness of the weather with a laugh. Here the trail would have been lost again save for the fact that the druggist's messenger boy also noticed her hair. He says, not unpoetically, that it looked like a yellow flame in the wet. He was standing in the doorway, and watched her come out. She went on down Market Street, he says, and before she had gone very far an old woman came up and spoke to her——"

"What?" It was Celia's weak voice that gasped the question. The detective apparently paid no attention.

"——an old woman spoke to her, and she stopped for a few moments in the rain listening to her. Then the two of them moved away, still down Market Street, but together."

The little group looked at each other in helpless bewilderment. The detective paused, observing them.

"Here we lose sight of her," he went on. "Where the messenger boy's eyes lose her in the rainy dusk we also lose her. She moves away—somewhere—with an old woman!"

He watched his hearers closely, but they apparently were too much amazed to answer.

"So you see," he said blandly, "there may have been something in that old woman story after all."

"What old woman story?" Celia's voice was very

low. Her face had grown deathly white. "I have been ill. I have heard nothing."

"I am afraid there has not been very much to hear," said the detective. "The information I have does not carry me very far unless one of you can make it more definite." He took out his notebook. "I find here, Mr. Burns, that you tell me that once before Miss Christine was spoken to by an old woman—a repulsive old woman?" He looked at Tommy.

"Yes, I told you that."

"You say that she was a beggar who asked for money. Was this the only time that Miss Christine mentioned having been addressed or annoyed by an old woman? Think well, now."

"She only mentioned it once," said Ada slowly, "to me."

"She mentioned it twice to me," said Tommy, "but the woman only spoke to her the once. Before that she only annoyed her by what Christine thought was a sort of espionage. She imagined that the creature watched her, followed her! She first mentioned the idea to me upon the night she bade good-bye to Mr. Wareham. I remember she asked me to look behind to see if I could see anybody dogging us. I looked around and thought I saw somebody in the dark, but could not be sure. She seemed nervous at the time, but laughed about it afterwards. She had never spoken to the woman or the woman to her. It was only the other day that the woman asked her for money."

"Well, then, the question is: Who is this old woman?"

Again the group looked at each other in puzzled silence. Celia's face was turned away.

"Or, rather," said the detective, "who might this

old woman possibly or conceivably be? No one but you, her sisters, can possibly help me in this."

Tommy fidgeted nervously. Celia lay very still.

"But how," Ada's voice was very low, "how can we possibly know who this old woman is?"

"I said 'possibly or conceivably might be,'" explained the detective patiently. "In other words, I think that the explanation must lie right here in this room. You ladies must be in the possession of some facts, family history or something, which may possibly give us a clue to the identity of this woman. She was not watching the girl for nothing. It was no coincidence that she is concerned in her disappearance. If you ever want to see Miss Christine again you must give me these facts, private though they may be. You are the only ones who can do so—you, her sisters."

For an instant there was silence in the room. Then Celia turned and faced the questioning look in Ada's eyes.

"That is just it," she said quietly. "We are not her sisters."

"Not her sisters?"

"No. We will tell you all we know. After all, it is only from Christine herself that we wish the secret kept. I hope what we can tell you may help—although I dread it too! Still, anything is better than this suspense."

The detective took out his notebook with businesslike promptitude. "Go on," he said.

"We had a sister Christine. She died with our mother when she was only a few days old. Had she lived she would have been almost a year older than we think Christine to be. Christine was deserted by her mother when she was a tiny baby just cutting her first

tooth. She had no one belonging to her, and would have gone to the police-station and to some foundling asylum had not Ada and I taken her ourselves. She thinks she is our sister, the little Christine who died! It would break her heart to know that she was an unwanted and deserted baby."

"This is new light with a vengeance!" exclaimed the detective. "The problem ought to be simple enough now. What do you say, Mr. Torrance?"

Mr. Torrance was looking at the sisters with new admiration. "I say that it was a brave and beautiful thing to do," he said gravely. His eyes dwelt longest on Ada's face.

The detective suppressed a smile. "Yes, it was all that," he assented cordially. "But what I meant was, how does the problem strike you? Tell me," turning to Celia, "from what you knew of the mother, do you think that she would be likely to show up again?"

"Why—I don't know. I know nothing of her mother."

"Well, of the grandmother, then, or the aunts, or the family generally? Might not this old woman be quite naturally accounted for?"

"I don't know, Mr. Johnson. You see, I know nothing about the family. There was no family—nothing."

"Oh," said Ada, shuddering. "Please don't."

"We must look facts in the face, dear. And there may be a chance of what Mr. Johnson suggests. Let him see the letter, Ada—the letter that came with the baby. It will tell him all we know."

As the blind girl left the room there was the sound as of someone falling violently over the third step from the top, and upon the victim being investigated he

turned out to be Micky Halloren, the landlady's boy, with a letter for Mr. Torrance.

"Sure, the dude wot give it to me said that ye left strict w—word that any sich were to be delivered at wanst," said Micky, grinning.

Mr. Torrance pressed some silver into the hand that held the letter. His face was a shade paler as he took the envelope and, with a word of apology, opened it. Its contents were not long, for he read it quickly and then crushed it in his hand. His face in the interval had become deathly, but in the shaded light of the room its pallor passed unnoticed.

"I hope Mr. Wareham is not worse," said Celia anxiously.

"No. It is not Mark. It is private—news. It can wait until we have finished here." His voice forbade questioning.

"This is the letter," said Ada, returning. "It has lain all these years in our one locked box. We hated it, yet we did not destroy it—it was you, Tommy, who kept us from that. I know the horrible thing by heart. It says, 'She was one too many. Her father won't keep her and I can't. She ain't been named yet.'"

"Horrible indeed!" ejaculated Mr. Torrance.

But the detective, who was looking intently at the paper in his hand, gave vent to a vigorous "By Jove!" followed by a long whistle.

"What is it?" asked Celia eagerly.

He looked at her with a dazed air. "What is it? I don't know. But either I'm crazy or this is the most remarkable thing I've ever run across!" He spread his broad hand over the dirty bit of paper and made an evident effort to recover his usual poise. "But I may be mistaken," he said more quietly. "Now I want to

know exactly how, when and where this deserted baby was found; and don't omit the slightest detail if you ever want to see your sister again."

Ada's eyes filled with quick tears, but Celia's eyes were bright and resolute. "I think I can tell you all just as it occurred. It is one of those scenes which impress themselves indelibly. It is as if it all happened yesterday. My mother had been dead nearly a year and I had just obtained work at the Stores. I had been there only a week and did not know all the rules, one of which was that no go-cart or baby-carriage should be allowed to stand anywhere but in the place provided. It was one of the days of the semi-annual ribbon sale, and we had been so rushed that we could scarcely draw our breath. In the early part of the afternoon I saw a woman come in with a tiny go-cart, which she left in the little niche between the two ribbon counters. I saw her only for an instant, and probably noticed her because she seemed so poor and so different from the crowds of shoppers around her. I did not think of the incident again until the sale was over and I heard the floor-walker blaming Miss Twiss, the head clerk, for allowing the go-cart to be left there. I peeped over and saw that there was a tiny baby in it—so pitiful and so wee, with hardly strength enough to cry! The Store was closing, and there seemed no doubt that the child had been deliberately deserted. They spoke of taking her to the police-station, and somehow—I never knew exactly why—it came to me to save the little thing. When they asked me about it I lied and said that I knew the mother and would see that the child was taken home. They all knew, or guessed, that it was a fib, but were glad enough to have the matter off their hands. So I brought the

baby home to Ada and we adopted her. All the girls who were with me at the ribbon counter knew about it, and for years they all came to see her and brought her presents, until one by one they drifted away. There are none of the old girls there now. Miss Twiss married Mr. Flynn, who is still in the Stores, and she is the only one besides Tommy who knows the truth about Christine."

She paused for a moment and then went on: "The baby was dressed in rags almost, and was unkempt and ill and miserable, but even then her hair was spun gold, her eyes like flowers. There was no mark upon anything, and the only scrap of writing was the note I have given you."

The detective, who had been writing steadily in his notebook, looked up.

"Can you give me the exact date of the ribbon sale?"

"Yes. The autumn sale always begins upon the same date, the sixteenth of October. It was the second day of the sale, just sixteen years ago this October."

Adam Torrance leaned over with a stifled exclamation, but the detective went calmly on:

"Any mark upon the child?"

"No, none. She was a perfect baby."

"You say she was cutting her first tooth?"

"Yes, it was almost through."

"Do you remember anything about the appearance of the woman who left the go-cart?"

"No, nothing, except that she looked old and poor. I thought her ugly."

"What makes you think she was old?"

"She was bent, and I think, I can't be sure now,

that her hair was grey. She gave the impression of being an old woman in every way."

"Did it not occur to you, then, that she could hardly be the baby's mother?"

"Yes. Ada and I often spoke of it. We thought it might be the grandmother."

"Just so. And have you ever, from that time till this, been troubled in any way?"

"Never."

The detective turned to Tommy.

"When Miss Christine spoke to you about the old woman who she thought watched her, did she say how long it was since she had first had that impression?"

"No; but I gathered that she had noticed it for some time."

The detective drummed thoughtfully upon the table with his pencil.

"Then," he said, "it looks as if the evidence up to date were all in."

"Not quite all," said Adam Torrance quietly. "Let me see the paper you are hiding under your hand!"

The detective slowly placed the paper upon the table. "I wanted to be sure before I showed it to you," he said. "I did not wish to raise hopes—or fears—unnecessarily. However, there it is. What do you make of it?"

For answer the other unclenched his hand and spread another crumpled piece of paper, face up, beside the first. It was the letter which Benson, the butler, had entrusted to Micky Halloren for delivery. "Look!" commanded Mr. Torrance tersely.

The two men bent forward, the detective eagerly as

a hound who scents a trail, Tommy in blank amazement. Their exclamations were simultaneous.

The writing on both scraps of paper was identically the same!

Celia, who had struggled up from her couch, gazed at it in wonder.

"What does it mean?"

No one answered her, and in silence they spelled out the words upon the second piece of paper.

"It's done now" (the scrawled writing ran). "I told you I'd tell you when it was done. Your girl's gone off like my girl went. She'll never hold up her head again. There ain't a pin to choose between my girl and your girl now except that your girl ain't dead yet. Perhaps she wishes she was by now. Fine detectives you've got. They'll never get her, and if they do it's too late now."

"It's the same writing," gasped Celia. "What does it mean?"

"It means that one search at least is ended," said Adam Torrance solemnly. "For your lost Christine is my lost daughter!" He buried his face in his shaking hands.

"Devil-work!" said Mr. Johnson. "Devil-work—that's what it means! And so devilish clever. The woman's either a wonder or a lunatic—the latter for choice! No one not mentally unsound could plot so cunningly——" He was stopped by the pressure of Ada's hand upon his shoulder.

"Please won't somebody tell me?" she asked. "I—I can't see."

"Yes, yes," said the detective. "Sit down, my dear lady! A clear statement will help us all. You see, we have been searching everywhere for the last month

for a trace of Mr. Torrance's lost daughter. She was kidnapped when she was a baby of six months, just cutting her first teeth—remarkable that the coincidence did not strike me at once!—she was stolen upon the eighth of October, sixteen years ago, and all these years her father has believed her dead. A letter came to her parents saying that she had been stolen in revenge by a mother whose own daughter had worked in the Stores and whose ruin the distracted creature laid at the door of the Stores' owner—Mr. Torrance. This letter, evidently to stop the search, said that the child was dead. It appeared genuine, and although the search was not dropped, no trace of the child was ever found. I may add that the writing of that first letter was undoubtedly the same as the writing of that which you found on the baby. (It gave me a tremendous start.) Then, about a month ago, Mr. Torrance received another letter saying that the child had not died, but had lived to work as a shop-clerk as the other poor girl had done, and that, like her, she was—er——”

“I understand,” said Ada quietly.

“Well, then, to-night comes another letter, still in the same writing (it's a peculiar hand; there's no mistaking it), saying that the revenge is complete. That—er—in fact——”

“I understand,” said Ada again.

“That the writing of all these three letters is the same as the writing of the letter which came pinned to the dress of the baby you found deserted upon the seventeenth of October in the Stores of Angers and Son, I have no manner of doubt. The conclusion is plain.”

“There is a difference of nine days in the dates,”

said practical Tommy. It was the first time that his amazement had allowed him to speak.

"Yes, naturally. Miss Celia says that the baby was in rags, was half starved and horribly neglected. Some interval would be needed to make the well-cared-for child look like that. (The clothes, of course, were exchanged for others.) Also a certain difference in dates was necessary lest the coincidence be too striking. Even as it was, it seems impossible (although, in fact, it is the most probable thing in the world) that no coincidence should have struck anybody. That is the darned cleverness of the thing! Did any of you know of the kidnapping?" he asked Celia.

"Why, yes. We read of it in the papers. But we did not feel especially interested. We did not know who Mr. Torrance was. He was just a name. We did not know that he had any connection with the Stores. And this baby—so evidently a neglected, unwanted child!—it would have been a miracle if the coincidence had struck us. And then—the note!"

"Ah, yes, the note. There's where the infernal cleverness of the whole thing lies. The note was a triumph: 'Her father won't keep her and I can't.' She is provided at once with a fictitious father and mother. 'She was one too many'—how horribly likely!—a masterpiece!"

Mr. Torrance raised his white face. It was evident that he had not heard the detective's explanation. His look was dazed. "Where is she now—my little Christine?" he said. "Did I tell you that she is Mona over again? Mona was my favourite sister, you know. I knew that she was Mona," he went on, with a little hysterical laugh, "and yet I did not know that she was my own daughter! And I have let them steal her away

a second time. What is it that the fiend says? 'There's not a pin to choose between——'"

"Stop it!" thundered the detective. "You'll be out of your mind first thing you know! I thought you weren't in a fit state to stand another shock; that's why I didn't show you the letter at once. But I want to tell you right here, Mr. Torrance, that if you break down now you are less than the man I took you for! You'll just have to brace up. We're going to find her for sure. Don't forget it! We know what we are doing now."

The stricken man made a great effort to pull himself together. "Yes," he said, "I know. I must not think of it. To find her only to lose her! To lose her like that! If I think of it I shall go mad. I—I—— Don't you see, the creature says it is too late! She will never hold up her——"

"Mr. Torrance!" Ada's soft voice held a note of command that pierced even the bewildered senses of the distracted man. "You must not speak of Christine like that! She may or may not be your daughter, but she has been our sister for sixteen years, and we will never allow a word of doubt to be spoken of her. In what danger her life may be we do not know, but we do know that it is only for her life that we need fear. From any other danger our Christine is safe, wherever she may be."

"Amen!" said Tommy Burns solemnly.

Adam Torrance caught the girl's hands in a mighty grip. "God bless you!" he said. "That was what I needed. I believe you. It is only for her life that we need fear."

"And as life is worth something," said the detective dryly, "we'll just see that they don't get a chance at that either!"

CHAPTER XXVI

MARK REMEMBERS A FACE

THE morning sun was shining cheerily through the curtains of Mark's pleasant room when, three days later, that young man awoke with the delicious consciousness of returning health strong upon him. The confusion in his head had cleared, and as his other injuries had been of no very serious nature he was already pleading to be treated no longer as an invalid.

"You know," he said, smiling into his adopted father's grave face, "that nothing is so bad for an invalid as suspense, and, although I am not an invalid, I feel sure that I shall become one if you don't stop being so plaguy mysterious! Seriously," his laughing face grew grave, "I want to know what is troubling you, sir. You are so different. Every day you are whiter and more worried. I know that the search can't be going well, but sometimes I think there is more than even that troubling you. If you could only trust me! The doctor says I may get up to-morrow. By the next day I shall be ready for anything. As long as I keep this left arm steady I am as good as ever."

"Mark," said Mr. Torrance irrelevantly, "haven't you something that you want to tell me on your own account—something which you promised to tell me when you were stronger?"

"Yes. But I do not want to worry you while you are so troubled. It can wait."

"I am afraid it cannot wait any longer, my boy. You are right in thinking that I have bad news for you, but before we speak of it I would like to hear the story that you promised me."

"Well, sir, it is very simple. It is just that before I went away to Vancouver I met the girl whom I hope some day to make my wife. You will be disappointed and hurt, perhaps, when I tell you that she is a poor girl and that her family is just—well, just an ordinary, everyday family, you know. Her name is, in fact, 'Brown.'"

He paused for a moment, but as the other made no comment he went on sturdily: "You have told me that you do not insist upon money, but that you wish me to marry a lady. That Miss Brown is a lady I can assure you upon my honour. I only ask you to meet her. Of course, I do not know whether she—whether I have any chance."

"Have you known Miss Brown long?"

"No. But you see it was a case when time didn't seem to count. It sounds silly, I know, but—oh, well, one can't explain these things."

"It was, of course, to her that you sent the note? You had not seen her before the accident—at the station or anywhere?"

"Why, no. I just swung off the train and into a car. Christine knew I was coming back, but she is not the sort of girl who would go to the station to meet a chap she had met only a few times."

"No, I suppose not. Well then, I must now give you my news. I have met the Miss Browns, and I do not need your word to assure me that they are ladies. I

have seen Miss Christine and spoken to her—in fact, she was for a time a clerk in the Stores——”

Mark smothered an exclamation.

“But she never received your note saying that you were ill. The evening of your accident she disappeared, and has not yet been found. That is my bad news, my boy, and that is why you must get well quickly. We need you to help us find her—no, you must not try to get up! To-morrow is the earliest, by the doctor’s orders, and besides I have much to tell you yet.”

Then very quietly he told him of the strange discovery of the past weeks. Of his certainty that Christine was his own lost daughter he said little. The astonishing facts alone were enough to stagger belief, and the invalid listened in dazed silence.

“Then you think these fiends have got her hidden somewhere? Keeping her away for a revenge on you?” he asked at last. “The thing is too preposterous to be believed.”

For answer Adam Torrance laid the last letter on the bed and bade him read it, watching his face grow ghastly as he realised its dreadful meaning. He expected a fainting fit at the very least, and had his hand already on the bell, but Mark was not made of fainting stuff. Scarcely had the vile purport of the scrawl become plain to him before he was out of bed, swaying a little, but utterly determined.

“If you will leave me I will dress,” he said politely. “Send Benson along to help me, for I must be careful of this arm. No, I am not mad, but I soon would be if I lay there in bed with Christine in God knows what peril! Why didn’t you tell me before—my poor little girl!” Tears of weakness stood in his blue eyes, but there was no slackening of purpose in his face.

In spite of his concern Adam Torrance felt a thrill of pride. No one could say that little Christine had not won a worthy love!

"Mark, don't be foolish! Don't you believe that everything is being done—everything! Do you suppose——"

"Everything is not being done while I am doing nothing!" said Mark briefly. Then, suddenly flaring out with impotent rage: "Everything being done? Why haven't they found her, then? What is Johnson thinking of? There must be plenty of clues. There can't be many old women like her around here. She ought to be as easy to find as the nose on your face. With eyes like hers——"

"What are you talking about? What do you know about the old woman's eyes?"

"Eh? Why—I saw her, of course. You see what you have done by not telling me before! Do you mean to say that you haven't a description of the old wretch?"

"That is exactly what we have not. Christine never described her and the boy who saw the meeting was too far off to see her face!" Mr. Torrance spoke soothingly, for, indeed, he thought that the boy had lost his head entirely.

"Oh, I'm not delirious," said Mark quickly. "I did see the creature. Saw her plainly under the street lamp. It was the night I walked with Christine to the post-box—the night I left for Vancouver."

It was his uncle's turn to be excited now.

"Why, yes. Christine did speak to Burns about it that night!" he admitted eagerly. "She said she thought she was being followed."

"She was. I noticed an old woman slipping along

behind us. I took her for a beggar, but as I turned to leave Christine I passed her when the light was full on her face, and I declare the malignant hate I saw there frightened me! She was such a repulsive-looking old creature that her face haunted me long after. I have never forgotten it—why, I can draw it! I thought at the time what a good sketch it would make. Get me some paper—quick! For once my talent for drawing will be of some use in the world.”

“Some use? Why, Mark, it will be every use. Oh, to think that we have a clue in hand at last! I’ll send Benson with your sketching kit, and I’ll telephone Johnson—and, Mark, won’t you do the sketch in bed, just to take one worry off my mind?”

With a chastened air Mark permitted himself to be propped up on the pillows. “So long as I am doing something,” he declared, “I don’t care where I do it.”

“And, Mark, Aunt Miriam is here. She has been staying here since you were hurt. She wants to see you! But I warn you she will talk of Christine, and perhaps——”

Mark groaned. “Oh, let her come up. Nothing could make the suspense worse than it is, and Aunt Miriam is such a good sort.”

Adam Torrance smiled a little as he left the room and dispatched Aunt Miriam in his stead. He knew that, if Mark could only stand it, her constant talk of Christine, of her beauty, her sweetness, and their own unnatural stupidity in not recognising her by instinct, would effectually prevent the young man’s mind from dwelling too closely upon the more immediate problems. For by some curious psychological process Aunt Miriam had almost convinced herself that she and she alone had had some inkling of the truth from the very

moment she had seen Christine. The news, she declared, had not come to her as a surprise at all! She had "felt in her bones" that Christine was not what she seemed to be, and she was never tired of bitterly blaming herself for what she described as the criminal want of self-confidence which had prevented her from stating her convictions earlier. Nevertheless, the good old lady had virtually adopted Ada and, by proxy, Celia (whom she had not yet seen), and her unfailing optimism had done much to keep up the general courage in those anxious days.

For in spite of all the new information which had made the detective so hopeful, there had been absolutely nothing to relieve the ever-growing dread of those who loved Christine. The young girl seemed to have vanished off the face of the earth. In spite of Mr. Johnson's best efforts, no new facts whatever had been brought to light. Time, money, effort had been spent like water, and the only result so far was a few dozen old women frightened into fits by the well-meant efforts of eager detectives.

One can imagine, then, the relief with which the unduly self-confident Mr. Johnson received the news that at last a certain clue had been found, although his satisfaction was necessarily tempered with annoyance that he had not thought of such a possibility before. At any rate, he lost no time in hurrying down to the Torrance house, where he found Mark surrounded by sketching materials and just putting the finishing touches upon a vivid sketch of as forbidding a face as any he had seen in a long day. Mark, who, in his amateur way, had the making of a clever artist, had certainly surpassed himself. The ugly, repulsive face stared at one with eyes that actually seemed

alive with hate. The thick lips were curling into a snarl.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the big detective. "It's only a question of time now, and a short time at that! A woman with a mug like this ought to leave a considerable mark somewhere. She's not known to the police, that's certain, or I would recognise her at once. But then we were practically sure of that, for there's not a spotted character in the city who has not been through our hands during the search. Well, I'll get photographs of this in the hands of our men at once. To-morrow ought to see us sure of our quarry."

"And to-morrow I get up!" said Mark. "Henceforth where you go I go. You'll need me, you know, for identification and perhaps for a few other purposes also."

"There is no use trying to dissuade him," declared Aunt Miriam. "Doctors or no doctors. Doctors are fools, anyhow—look at me! If I had believed everything that the doctors had to say I would be dead instead of only half-dead, as I am now. Besides, I have an intuition that Mark is destined to find our dear girl. If I had followed my first intuition she would never have been lost. The moment I saw her I felt a strange instinct—yes, I did, Adam. I think I may be allowed to know my own feelings!"

"Quite so," agreed the detective blandly. "And now I will lose no time in getting this excellent picture into the proper hands. You may be sure that the moment I have placed the original I will let you know. Like Miss Torrance, I have an intuition that we shall not have long to wait."

As he left the room he passed the solemn Benson,

who entered to announce that Miss Ada Brown was waiting in the library.

"Thank God, there is news for her at last!" said Mr. Torrance. "Tell her I'll be down at once." He left the room in a hurry, singularly at variance with his usual dignified manner.

"Did you see that, Mark?" asked Aunt Miriam shrewdly. "I am not a prophet or the son of a prophet, but I have an intuition——" She nodded mysteriously after the retreating figure and made strange but illuminative gestures with her tiny hands.

"Why, auntie! How absurd. It is only his natural anxiety——"

"Natural anxiety, indeed! Did you see him fix his tie in the mirror as he went out? (Just as though she could see whether it was straight or crooked, poor thing!) Did you notice that he did not ask me to go down to her—as he might very properly have done? Besides, I have seen what I have seen, and I feel instinctively that I am not mistaken. Intuition is a very strange thing. I shall always feel that if I had followed my intuition in regard to Christine——"

"I think it is time for my medicine, auntie. Will you see?"

CHAPTER XXVII

THE FIRST CLUE

"LIFE is queer!" said Mark, and having made that brilliantly original remark he proceeded to amplify it. "It seems to me," he said, "that life is like a port-manteau packed in a deuce of a hurry. All the necessary things are there, but they are so misplaced, so jumbled together, that one never places one's hand upon the right thing at the right time. If one wants, for instance, the time-table one invariably grasps the soap; if a tooth-brush is frantically needed, one's pyjamas persist upon being the only thing in evidence, and so forth. Still, if one waits and is properly patient, it is possible that things may sort themselves in time."

"Perhaps," said Tommy absently. He was pacing the room impatiently, stopping at every turn to gaze out of the window, for the usually prompt Mr. Johnson was already ten minutes late.

"Take me, for example," went on Mark, who, as he had been forbidden to walk more than was necessary, was trying to drown his own fiery impatience in philosophy. "My life portmanteau is fairly well supplied, but everything was put in upside down. I have (I hope you will pardon these personal allusions) a certain artistic talent, but it has never been of the slightest use to me until yesterday. I have a certain

amount of brain-power, but I have never been allowed to use it properly. Uncle's money is a good thing: I adore money and what it will buy, but in my portman-teau it has been, like the suit of pyjamas, a coverer-up of other things just as useful. And then—there is Chr—Miss Brown. If I had met her a few years ago what a difference——”

“He is coming now!” said Tommy. “Let me help you on with your coat. You feel quite sure that you are able to go with us?”

“Quite. I'm perfectly well.”

“That's good news,” said the big detective, who entered in time to catch the last words. “We can't do without you this morning. The picture has been thoroughly identified, and that without approaching the original—whom, of course, we must not frighten too soon. She is known as Granny Bates, and lives in a hovel in Hill Street. The place has been under constant surveillance since we spotted it early this morning, but the sooner we make our raid the better. The men report no sign of life, but of course that is to be expected. It's early yet, and she is probably lying low. Mr. Torrance is waiting in the motor, so we will start if you are ready.”

“We are ready. But you are not going to take a motor, surely?”

“Only part of the way, although we might, I suppose, drive right up to the door. No one in that house can get away. Still, it might be a risk.”

“Johnson,” said Mark, “if you take any risks—why, man, if they are frightened, who can tell what they might not do? Even now, if they guess that your men have surrounded them and she is there—in their power——”

"They can't guess. The men are not sitting on the doorstep and—we're wasting time."

It was a quartet of stern and white-faced men who left the motor at the corner of Hill Street. Now that the end of their long search seemed in sight, they were sick with apprehension. Even the phlegmatic detective was less cheery than usual. "Somehow," he whispered aside to Tommy, "I kind of believe in intuition myself, and if there's anything in this kind of 'gone' feeling that I have, we're in for another disappointment, and a big one."

They walked down the squalid street singly, although, indeed, it seemed as if a regiment might have tramped by at that hour without arousing much interest behind its dirty window-panes. At a time when other streets were awakening to the life of a busy day Hill Street still slept. The clock goes backward in Hill Street and night usurps the place of day. Only one rickety door sprang open as they passed and one tousled head regarded them with eyes of lively suspicion.

Upon Granny Bates' hovel there rested an ominous quiet. There are differences in quiet, not only in degree, but in kind. There is the quiet of living things, the stillness which speaks of bated breath and hushed, strained waiting, and there is also the quiet of emptiness, the stillness which means that life has gone away. This and the instinctive realising of it was all expressed in Mark's whispered phrase: "It feels as if there were no one here!" a remark at which the big detective shook his head, and striding up to the closed door he lifted the latch, prepared to use his great strength to force immediate entrance. But, greatly to his surprise, the door opened without much effort. Its only security

had been a rusted key in a crazy lock. They found themselves in a tiny passage, dark and evil-smelling. To their right an open door led into a small room, whose one dirty window faced the street. Its spare contents were plainly revealed in the morning light—a table, three rickety chairs, a broken stove! The air was comparatively fresh, owing to a broken window-pane, inadequately plugged with paper, but the ashes in the broken stove were long cold. The room was empty! With a suppressed groan Mark dashed past the rickety table to a closed door upon the other side. This led into a room still smaller, dirtier, more evil-smelling, and quite as empty. Its one window looked out upon a small and filthy backyard, where a gaunt cat sunned itself. In a corner stood something which was probably intended for a bed, its soiled bedclothes dragging upon the unswept floor.

“Gone!” ejaculated the detective. “By Jove! It’s a cold trail—we’ve come too late!”

There was only one other room in the hovel—a tiny lean-to kitchen, filled with refuse, and plainly never used. Its broken door was half open and led into the backyard, untenanted save for the hungry cat.

With a sudden feeling of nausea Mark sank into one of the rickety chairs. The other men looked at each other in silent dismay.

“She’s made a clean get away!” declared Johnson. “But we’re this much farther ahead. There’s no doubt now but that we are on the right track. The old woman who fled from this place is the old woman we want—that’s something! Now let us see what else we may find to help us. With practised ease he moved around the room, sniffing, peering, examining with trained senses. The others watched him in silence.

"Well," he said presently, "there is not much to go on. This fire has been out for a long time—weeks, probably. They must have got out of this the moment they had the girl. It was all well planned; everything done quickly but not in a hurry—the room's disorder was natural, I imagine—everything shows signs of having been deliberately abandoned."

"How about the disordered bed in the other room?"

"Oh, old granny wouldn't trouble to make a bed—although it does look as if this one were even more than ordinarily upset. Notice the wild disorder of the clothes. They have been taken up bodily and flung upon the floor!"

"It looks," said Mark, who had succeeded in recovering himself, "it looks as if someone had been searching for something."

"That is so. It does. Look, the pillow-case even has been stripped off. By Jove! that accounts for the way in which the ashes in the stove are raked out! Someone has been searching, and, not finding, has been looking for traces of something which might have been burned."

"Suppose, then," said Mark, "that we look also. See, there is candle-grease on the bed. The other searcher had to look by night. What she could not find, we may."

"Excellent," agreed the detective, a little dryly. "If you go on you will soon be deducing things like Sherlock Holmes. Strange how deductions are almost always wrong—except in books. I remember once——"

But what Mr. Johnson remembered was never known, for at that moment Tommy, who was struggling with a very dirty blanket, began to sniff

violently and to dance around in a most peculiar manner.

"Smell this!" he almost shrieked, pushing the unsavoury covering under Mark's nose. "Smell it, smell it!"

Mark sniffed eagerly. "Why, it's—it's—— What is it anyway? It's like the dressing that they put on my head!"

"It's carbolic acid, man! Carbolic—acid—don't you see? Christine had carbolic acid—and glycerine and rose-water! And this blanket has been dosed with the acid—not the pure, the kind they sell diluted—but the smell is the same!"

"It is certainly carbolic," said the detective gravely. He turned away that the others might not see the sudden fearful suspicion in his eyes.

But Tommy saw nothing ominous in the discovery. "She has been here," he declared, "and she has been clever enough to leave at least a trace of her presence. She had the stuff in her pocket; what more easy than to soak the nearest thing at hand. She must have been lying upon this very bed——"

"Stop it!" Mark, who was tugging frantically at the rotten mattress, felt deathly faint at the vision which Tommy's excited words had conjured up. "Here, help me with this. If she left that she may have left something else." They dragged the mattress into the other room and carefully examined it. It was dirty and torn, but it concealed nothing. The bed itself was then examined with a similar result—the floor was gone over almost inch by inch; the blanket, the quilt, the pillow, all yielded nothing. Yet Mark would not give up. "I am sure there is something," he declared over and over again. "If she was

here she left something, and they missed it and came back for it."

"Perhaps they got it?" suggested Mr. Torrance.

"No—else why did they rake out the ashes in order to satisfy themselves whether or not it had been burned?"

"Your reasoning is sound," said the detective; "but, like lots of sound reasoning, it doesn't help any, for if the other searchers did not find it, it is evident that we are not going to fare any better. We have tried everything——"

"No, there must be some things which we have not tried. For instance, one might try putting oneself in her place." Suiting the action to the word, he flung himself at full length upon the uninviting bed. "Now," he went on, "two of you go and seat yourselves in those two chairs by the table, so that I may see in what possible places I might hide something without making any movement which you might detect."

Tommy and Mr. Torrance at once did as he requested, and the detective, tired of what he considered mere tomfoolery, made a dignified retreat into the back-yard.

Left alone, Mark began eagerly to examine his immediate surroundings. "I shall imagine," he said to himself, "that her hands were free, otherwise she would not have been able to extract the cork from the carbolic acid. Also, it is unlikely that she could move very much without being seen." He lay very still, examining every inch of wall and bed and floor which might possibly have come within reach of the girl's hands. The result seemed to be absolutely *nil*. Barring the mattress, which had been thoroughly searched, there seemed no possible hiding-place anywhere. There was

nothing on the wall, and, although the plaster was chipped and in places broken, there was nowhere a crevice deep enough to serve. The floor also was without cover of any kind, and the cracks were solidly filled with packed dirt.

"And yet," thought Mark obstinately, "she must have left something—else why——?" Suddenly his heart gave a leap and then seemed to stop beating! His hand, which had been blindly groping along the low wainscoting behind the bed, had touched something—something soft! Cautiously he peered over the edge—he could see nothing but the line of dirty grey board skirting the plastered wall. And yet he had certainly touched something soft! He felt along carefully with his fingers—yes, there, pressed tight into a crevice, where the warped board had parted a little from the wall, was something—something so small, so tightly pressed in, so like the colour of the grey board that its presence had escaped the sharp eyes of all the searchers! With a feeling of almost superstitious awe, Mark drew the something out—it lay in his hand, a little grey silk glove! With something very like a sob he raised it to his lips.

Holding it reverently, he went into the other room and laid it quietly on the table.

Tommy caught at it with a choking cry. "Christine's—it is Christine's glove!"

It lay there on the table like a living thing—already falling again into the shape of the hand it had covered—a girl's small hand, whose helpless fingers seemed to clutch their hearts.

Adam Torrance drew a deep breath. "God keep her!" he said. "If we fail to find her now we are less than men!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN HILL STREET

LET us leave the puzzled searchers now with the clue of the glove in their hands and go back to Christine, who has certainly been left to her own devices long enough. We know that upon the evening of her disappearance she came out of the Stores sharply upon time. It was raining, but not heavily, and as she wore a rain-coat and a little toque that the rain "wouldn't hurt," and as she loved the feel of the rain upon her face, and her hair was the kind which rain loves to fashion into lovely curling tendrils, she decided to walk home. This decision was strengthened by her seeing, without seeming to see, the watchful figure of Van Slyke upon the opposite side of the street. It would never do to allow this impudent young man to imagine that she, Christine, was conscious of his pursuit, and was compelled to escape from it by means of an unromantic street car! All this was decided in the passing of a second or so. Without perceptible hesitation, she set out, turning at Market Street, and having the satisfaction of seeing, again without seeming to see, that Van Slyke had moved moodily off in the opposite direction.

"So that's settled," said the girl to herself, with a little gurgle of laughter. "Perhaps, after awhile, Mr.

Tommy will admit that I am quite capable of taking care of myself."

She walked along briskly, thinking of nothing in particular, until, as the red and yellow lights of the corner drug-store gleamed through the wet, she remembered that Ada was expecting glycerine, rose-water, and carbolic acid. All three girls were careful of their pretty hands, and they made up their own lotion. Christine went in and gave her order. The druggist was quite right when he said that she laughed at his observations upon the badness of the weather. She felt like laughing, and did not think the weather bad at all. Did she not have in her pocket a letter from Him—shortest of all his letters, a note really, but saying that He was coming home! The druggist could not be expected to know this, neither could the messenger boy, upon whom she smiled as she went out and who was charmed into watching her down the rainy street.

At first sight of the old woman Christine felt nothing save gladness that this time she had something in her purse besides car tickets. She could give the poor creature some money and satisfy her. But to the girl's surprise the beggar did not ask for money; instead, she burst into a long story, not very lucid, of a little grandchild of hers who was very ill, and who had been crying all day to see the lady with the pretty hair. By this it was evident that Granny Bates had watched Christine to some purpose, for no plea could more quickly and surely have won the instant sympathy of the young girl. She loved children, and they loved her. In Brook Street there was not one who was not her friend, and she knew quite well that there were many others from darker streets to whom she had often passed a

pleasant word. That one of these poor mites should wish to see her was not surprising, and out of the young and innocent joy in her own heart was born a tender pity. She went with the old woman without a moment's indecision or suspicion, eager to give of her own fullness and intent only on the possible relief which she might bring to the suffering child.

It was darker now, and Christine followed the old woman blindly. Of the squalid streets she had not the slightest fear. They were quiet enough at this hour. Once, with a sudden alarm for Celia, she asked her guide if the child's illness were a fever, but with quick cunning she was reassured. The child, it seemed, had merely fallen and broken a leg, but the pain was bad, and nothing would quiet her but a sight of the pretty lady from Brook Street. They slid into Hill Street unnoticed. A fog was creeping up. The policeman who ought to have been thereabouts was elsewhere (a common enough phenomenon), and the rain and supper-time had swept the dismal street almost clear. Not once did Christine's sixth sense warn her of danger. The happy and healthy are seldom clairvoyant, and the aroused instinct of the girl's subconscious mind might beat in vain against the barrier of her pleasant thoughts. She entered the hovel eagerly—smiling—thinking only of the restless child.

A man, dark-browed and lowering, rose from beside the broken stove. Christine gave him a pleasant nod. "Where is she?" she asked in her clear voice. The old woman pointed to the inner room. Drawing off her glove, Christine turned to the door—the next moment she was seized, her half-cry was choked by a handkerchief held tightly against her lips. She was conscious of a strong, sickly scent——

When she struggled back to consciousness she realised nothing except that she felt very ill, that she could scarcely breathe, and that she was lying down somewhere in the dark. As memory came back and her brain cleared, she knew that she must be upon the bed in the inner room of the hovel she had entered. What had happened? Had she fainted? Was she lying there waiting for the doctor? Then, with a chill feeling which as yet was hardly fear, she remembered how she had been seized from behind—she had not fainted. Something else had happened, but what it was she could not realise. Perhaps that man whom she remembered as sitting by the stove had tried to rob her? A thought of the pitiful sum in her purse made this idea seem ridiculous. At any rate, it was evident that there was no child with a broken leg, and that she had been lured to this place upon false pretences. A feeling of anger surged up overpowering the sense of weakness. She tried to call out sharply, only to find that she could not speak—she was gagged! Thoroughly alarmed now, she tried to raise herself. She could not lift her head an inch from where it lay!

But her hands were free. She could untie the knots, unfasten the gag. After a few moments' frantic effort she found that equally impossible. She could do nothing. She was lying flat upon her back, fastened, not painfully but securely, to the narrow bed, unable to move, and helpless save for the useless freedom of her hands, which could not reach, much less untie, a single knot. She knew by feeling that she still wore her rain-coat, but her hat had been removed.

What did it all mean?

Some mistake, perhaps, or was it all a bad dream? She remembered having experienced this helpless feel-

ing in a nightmare. Perhaps she would wake soon. Too tired to struggle any longer, she lay still. The room was not quite dark, as she at first had thought; there was light from somewhere, and a murmur of voices. It must be a very vivid dream.

Turning her head slightly, she found that the light came through the open doorway. There was a lamp there on a table, and seated by the table were the old woman who had pleaded for the sick grandchild and the man who had been sitting by the stove. With a little painful effort she could see their faces quite plainly. It must have been their voices that she had heard, for they were talking. They spoke in lowered tones, and, try as she would, Christine could catch only an occasional word. It seemed that the old woman was demanding something which the man refused. Suddenly he struck the table with his clenched fist and uttered a guttural "No!" The blow and the sharply spoken word roused the girl to full wakefulness. She knew that this was no dream. It was terrifying reality. What could it mean? If she could only understand!

Closing her eyes, she tried to calm herself, to think out the puzzle. There had been no sick child; she had been lured here and drugged. Yes; that could be the only meaning of the sickly smell, the loss of consciousness, the illness upon waking. But why? And how long had she been here? With a pang of fear she thought of Celia and Ada. How frightened they would be! How Tommy would rage! What terrible catastrophes he would imagine! (Tommy was so silly sometimes.) As her senses came back she felt more angry than frightened at her own plight. The whole thing seemed so foolish, so motiveless. Yet there must be a motive somewhere! The monotonous voices in

the other room went on. They must know the motive—perhaps they were talking of it now? With a new incentive, she strained her ears to listen. Yes! either they were talking more loudly or her ears were recovering from the dulling influence of the drug, for she could hear. The man was speaking:

“I tell you we’ve got to get her out of here to-night.”

“I know that, you fool! But it’s early yet.” (Christine felt relief.) “There’s no hurry, and there’ll never be a better opportunity than now. Haven’t I waited long enough for my revenge! I tell you”—her voice rose hoarsely—“that I can’t wait! What’s to be done must be done now—here. The devil knows it’s safe enough! I tell you I won’t wait——”

“You’ve got to wait! Didn’t I tell you at the start——” the man leaned across the table and spoke in lower but not less forcible tones. Christine could not hear what he said, but could see the effect upon the old harridan, who first snarled, and then wept, and then hoarsely pleaded—all without avail.

There was something which she wanted done, Christine gathered. What, she could not guess; but her sixth sense, now roused to duty, warned her of peril to herself. She found herself praying that the man might hold out—as indeed he seemed very likely to do.

Finally he rose to his feet with an oath. “Enough of this!” he declared. “It’s time we got the girl away. She will be less noticed now than later. I’m going to get the cart.” Without another word he strode out, slamming the door behind him. The old woman’s face was terrible as she watched him go—baffled rage, hate and fear made it hideous; and there was something else! Christine felt her anger chill into fear as she

saw it, for it was a something from which all sane people, however brave, must shrink—insanity!

"She's crazy!" gasped Christine. One problem at least seemed solved. Instinctively the girl closed her eyes and pretended to be still unconscious. But her thoughts raced. It did not matter now what her plight meant; she put that mystery aside and turned her attention to her present danger. In the other room was a crazy woman bent, for some reason, on doing her harm. She was helpless. She was to be taken away. The man had gone for a cart. When her friends missed her, they could not find her. Even if they succeeded in tracing her here, she would be gone. They would not know—unless—unless she could leave something. What?

Danger is a great quickener of wits, and Christine was naturally quick. She realised that a great deal might depend upon leaving a trace of her presence here. But, of course, her captors would realise it too. They would take precautions. She felt with her free hand in her rain-coat pocket—only bottles there—impossible to leave a bottle. Ah! but the contents? The acid! It was a bare chance, but worth the taking. The cork was hard to draw, but it was out at last, and stretching as far to the side as she could, she poured some of the contents on the blanket. Almost she poured it all, but reflection came in time; she might need it later to leave yet another trace. That the time might come when, in terror of some unknown fate, she might think of this as the deadly poison it was, never entered her head.

In the second pocket of the rain-coat there was nothing save the glove which she had taken off as she entered the hovel. It was of light-weight silk, dark

grey in colour, and so small and soft that it might be hidden almost anywhere. Very cautiously she felt about the bed with her hands. The mattress was old and torn; but, if the glove were missed, it would certainly be searched. The pillow was also out of the question. Moving very painfully, she pushed herself nearer the far side of the bed, nearer yet, until her right hand could slip down between it and the wall. She shuddered as she touched the greasy wainscoting, for she could feel its filth upon her finger-tips; but, fighting down her disgust, she ran her hand carefully along the upper edge. The crevice, though hard to see, was easy to feel. It seemed very small, but there was a chance that it might hide the glove. With trembling fingers, Christine pressed it down and in, packing it as tightly as she could. The old woman in the outer room had ceased to mutter, and sat sullenly waiting. The lamp smoked unchecked, filling the room with a sickening odour, and outside the rain drove in gusts against the windows.

The little glove once safely bestowed in the crevice, Christine pushed herself painfully back into her former position—none too soon, for she was still breathing heavily from the effort when the opening of the outer door announced the return of the man.

"Well, is she ready?" he asked roughly. "None of your sulking, now, or I'll throw up the game. Did you give her another dose?"

Another dose! Christine grew cold with fear. If they drugged her again, what might not happen! Helpless as she was, she would be doubly helpless then. She lay very still, trying with a terrible effort of will to control the trembling which had seized her.

It seemed, however, that the old woman was afraid

of the man in this mood, for she mumbled something which he evidently took for an assent, and together they came into the room where the girl was lying.

"Where's her hat?" asked the man again. "Look sharp, now, and see that none of the hat-pins or fixings are missing. Look and see if her handkerchief's safe, and her pocket-book, and the bottles she had in her pocket. It won't do to leave so much as a shoe-string here."

With sulky haste the woman did his bidding, tying the larger articles securely into a pillow-case.

"Where's her gloves?" demanded the man suddenly.

His companion pointed to the glove upon the girl's left hand.

"Where's the other one?"

Christine felt her heart sink. She dared not open her eyes, but she felt that her captors were staring at each other in angry dismay.

"Well, it's got to be found," said the man's voice. "Here, let's get her out to the cart, and then we can search the room. I saw her draw it off as she came in, so it must be somewhere."

Muttering angrily, the old woman bent over the girl. Christine lay very still. A knot was untied, another, and yet another—she was free! No—the man's hand was on her! With a dexterous twist the woman wrapped her skirts tightly around her ankles and tied them there. "All ready!" she said. The man thrust his arm under her shoulders, and together they lifted the seemingly insensible girl. Christine had the wit to let her arms hang heavily and to resist the impulse to raise her drooping head. They carried her quickly through the lighted room, into the small, dark

hall, and thence out into the rainy street. Silently, swiftly, she was lifted and laid down upon something hard—the bottom of a cart, she judged. With a wild leap of joy and hope she felt the rain beat down upon her face and breathed the air, so fresh and clear after the suffocating atmosphere of the room. Oh! if they would only leave her for a moment. Bound though she was, and unable to make a sound, she might still attract someone's attention by sitting up and using her hands. Now that she could raise her head, she might manage to undo the gag! Then she would be safe. Bad though the street was, there would be someone who would listen to a girl's scream. There were people passing by even now on the pavement. Once she heard the man exchange a surly jest with someone. Oh, if he would only take his heavy hand from her chest! But not even this wild chance was to be hers. The cart had been prepared for her coming, and in less time than it takes to tell it she was fastened as securely to the boards as she had been to the bed. In the agony of realisation she forgot her rôle and moaned. Instantly the gag was tightened against her mouth.

"She's coming to," muttered the man. "Go you and find the glove. Be quick! If it fell on the floor it may have been gathered up and burnt. Make sure—better rake out the ashes."

Again there was silence, save for the occasional rattle of the horse's harness and the swish of the rain. It was very dark, and Christine had no longer need to close her eyes except as a shield from the pelting drops. Presently the man stirred himself and spread something over her, shutting even the rain out and burying her in a purgatory of ill-smelling cloth and moist old rubber.

Another pedestrian slouched by with a word of greeting; the horse moved impatiently and the man swore. Then Christine heard the muffled slam of a house-door, and the woman's voice spoke in a whisper close to her.

"It's not there. I've searched everywhere—mattress, bedclothes, pillow, everything. There's no trace in the stove, but it must have been burnt."

Again the man swore deeply.

"Don't worry," said the woman. "What I can't find they can't. The glove's not there. Get in."

Without further words the two climbed into the cart, which immediately began to move. Cautiously Christine pushed the smothering cover from her face. It might be of some use if she could find out the way they went. But the sides of the cart were high, and, try as she would, she could not lift her head. All she could tell was that they were passing slowly through dark streets, over pavements of whose roughness every bone in her body gave instant evidence. Even these partially lighted ways were left behind, and they passed into the thick blackness of the night. It was not raining so heavily now, and the wind had died down. Christine could hear the murmur of voices from the seat in front of her and the squelching of the horse's hoofs in the soft mud of unpaved roads. They were making for the country, then. Where? And why?

The mystery of the whole thing enveloped the girl more closely, more ominously than the blackness of the night. It terrified, it paralysed, it crushed out every spark of hope in her heart. Here out in the open, with every scent eloquent of the wide, wet country about her, the terror of the thing seemed even more monstrous, more hideously impossible! Perhaps, too, the long

strain was telling. Her thoughts grew feverish, disconnected. Now she thought of Celia and Ada, and the tears came freely; now it was of Tommy she thought, with a flash of hope; now she shuddered and moaned at the recollection of the old woman's face peering into hers; but most of all it was of Mark that she thought, of his return to find her gone! This was pure torture. What would he think? What could he think? She could see the puzzled wonder on his handsome face, the disappointment and, perhaps, disillusion in his eyes. Would he care to think twice of a girl who was the centre of some vulgar mystery? Even as she shrank from this picture some whiff of country perfume brought back that perfect day when they had driven out to the inn on the Dalby Road. How happy they had been! Somehow, as she thought of him as he was that day, the other thoughts lost their power to hurt her. Her memory of him was not that of a man easily daunted. Perhaps in him, after all, lay her greatest hope. He was strong, brave, clever!—but she was growing weaker, a jolt of the cart was now enough to turn the current of her thought.

They were going faster. The horse had been whipped up. The clouds were clearing a little; it might be moonlight soon. The two upon the front seat had fallen into grim silence. Christine's head seemed ready to burst with pain—she wished it would rain again to cool the fever in her blood.

Presently her impressions grew less and less distinct. She dreamed of curious things, and was still dreaming when the cart stopped with a jerk. This was important, she knew. She realised hazily that she ought to be quick to notice and keen to remember, but she could not rouse herself. Even when they lifted her out of

the cart, she opened her eyes only for a moment. In that moment she had a vision of a door with curious posts which seemed oddly familiar. But the impression faded as quickly as it had come. She knew that she was carried through the door and up some stairs; then she smelt the sickly scent again, and remembered nothing more.

CHAPTER XXIX

MR. JOHNSON IS CONFIDENT

MR. JOHNSON held the little grey glove in the palm of his hand, and an expression of admiration spread itself over his broad face.

"Clever!" he said; "very clever! That young lady has certainly got brains. Also," he made a bow in Mark's direction, "someone else who shall be nameless. Almost you convince me that there is something in those story-book methods. This will put fresh heart into the search. Wonderful how comforting it is to know that one is on a live trail! Well, we've done all we can do here, and the neighbourhood seems to be waking up. Let's try our luck outside."

"Question the neighbours, do you mean?"

"We'll go through this neighbourhood with a sieve and a microscope. There is sure to be someone who can tell us something—unless the kidnappers possessed the art of making themselves invisible. They live in terror of the police in these parts, and it will be easy to get them to speak. Talk about honour among thieves—bah! It doesn't exist."

"Then I suppose you wish this part of the inquiry left entirely to you?"

"Well, Mr. Wareham, I think that we should get better results. And, if you will excuse me, I might mention that you are beginning to look pretty well

done up. It will be home and bed for you if you are wise. I'll run right around with the news as soon as we get any."

Mr. Torrance, who had been watching Mark's growing pallor with anxiety, readily agreed to the detective's suggestion, and even Tommy heaved a sigh of relief when the invalid was safely stowed away in the motor. He was eager to hurry with the news to Brook Street, and glad that for once he must be the only messenger, as Mr. Torrance could not leave Mark. Tommy was too simple and too loyal a soul to feel jealousy, yet it was with a lightened heart that he watched the two men out of sight and turned his steps in the direction of the House of Windows. And Adam Torrance was conscious of a pang which was very like envy as he thought of how the blind girl's face would brighten at Tommy's news.

"Fine chap that!" said Mark, as if in answer to his thoughts. "By Jove, he's been better than a brother to those girls. He wanted to marry one of them once, but somehow it never came off."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Torrance; and then, after a perceptible pause: "Which one?"

"Which? Oh, well, I *think* it was Miss Celia."

"Is that so? Well, I am not surprised. Miss Celia is a charming woman. It would be most suitable."

"But, like many other suitable things, it has apparently failed to suit," said Mark carelessly; but as he noticed the sudden complacency with which his uncle approved Tommy's choice, he turned aside to hide a smile. "If Aunt Miriam had seen that," he thought, "it would have made assurance doubly sure!"

As has been observed before, Mr. Johnson was a man of energy, and so well did he and his assistants work, that by lunch-time Hill Street had been thoroughly investigated, and hung, so to speak, as limp and empty as an old sleeve, turned inside out.

At one o'clock he presented himself, notebook in hand, placid and self-confident again, at the Torrance home.

"Well," he began, without preliminaries, "we know what there is to know—and it's not much. Granny Bates and the man who passes as her son have lived in the shanty in Hill Street for the past five years. The man is a bricklayer and makes good wages when he is working, but that is seldom. He is incurably lazy, a born loafer apparently, but harmless unless drinking hard; when in drink, the neighbourhood fears him, and even the old woman keeps out of his way. But, curiously enough, he is not an habitual drunkard. He has, it appears, 'spells,' which are often a month or even two months apart. He is known as Tough Wilson. The old woman is popularly supposed to be shy in the upper story. The children are frightened of her—and it takes something to frighten a Hill Street child! Not one of them would venture near her house or follow her in the street. It seems that at first the youngsters played a few tricks—just as a sort of friendly introduction into the neighbourhood, you understand; but the reprisals were so swift and terrifying that even the boldest gave it up. The mothers, espousing the children's cause, declared her to be a witch and a devil, and other choice things, and refused the social amenities. Granny became, in fact, a pariah in Hill Street, and as she never made the slightest attempt to be 'friendly,' that position must

have suited her to a nicety. I may say the female portion of Hill Street society is frankly delighted with the prospect of her being 'wanted' by the police. They told me all they knew with a lavishness which wasted a few valuable hours.

"However, boiled down, we learn that: First.—On the night of Christine's disappearance, Granny Bates was seen slipping down the street at about six-thirty, or thereabouts, with a wonderful lady with shining hair. Little Timmy O'Hagan was the only one who noticed them, but he noticed to some purpose. He says the lady was so pretty that he slid along after them just to have another look. She was walking quickly, he says, and smiling. Evidently she went willingly. Timmy saw her turn and say something to the old woman just as they got to the door. The hag held the door open, and the lady went in. Then the door was shut. Timmy was too frightened of Granny to peer through the keyhole, and the window was dark—possibly they had pinned something over it. That is all Timmy knows except that he waited around about an hour in the rain for the pretty lady to come out, but she did not come.

"Second.—Bill Connely remembers the night because that was the night he got roaring drunk and was taken in by the police. He remembers starting out for the saloon at about nine o'clock, and in passing Granny's hovel was surprised to see the shadowy outline of a horse and cart drawn up by the pavement. Tough Wilson was standing by the cart. The door of the hovel was open, and by the dim light from it he saw the horse, and recognised it as the old white mare belonging to a gentleman named Mike Donlan, over in Everleigh Street. Being in a facetious mood

he stopped and said, 'Hello, Tough! going home to visit the old folks?' and that pleasant personage replied, with unusual good nature, 'You bet I am!'—not a very illuminative conversation, unfortunately. Bill Connely did not notice anything at all unusual about the cart, save the fact of its being there at all. He could not say whether or not there was anything in it. He only noticed the horse because it was a white horse and the light fell on it.

"Third.—Two other men noticed the horse and cart in front of Granny Bates' door, and one other at least spoke to Tough Wilson in passing, but only to pass a word about the weather. One man noticed the cart drive away with two figures on the front seat. The occurrence was discussed in the street, of course, and the general impression was that Tough and Granny had 'lit out.'

"Fourth.—Mike Donlan, owner of the white mare, well remembers renting the animal to Tough Wilson. He didn't know what for. Never thought to ask. Tough wouldn't have told him if he had; folks in Everleigh Street mind their own business. Tough wanted the mare overnight. Paid for her, and got her, and brought her back at noon next day. She seemed rather tired, but not very much so. She was muddy, but not too muddy. She was hungry, but not more hungry than she often was, having a ruinous appetite at the best of times. Tough hadn't let drop a word about where he had been or what doing. Why should he? It was his own business! So much for that interview.

"Fifth.—Owner of cart found and interviewed with almost precisely the same result. Tough had rented the cart without reason, and returned it without ex-

planation. Paid for it, and departed. Yes, the cart was muddy, but it naturally would be muddy after a rainy night. The bottom of the cart was not wet, because it had been covered with an old rubber rug—black. There was nothing else in the cart either when it went away or when it came back.

"That is the sum of the evidence. Problem: what was in the cart, and where did the cart go?"

Mr. Johnson laid the notebook upon his knee and looked up complacently.

"It seems to me," said Mark irritably, "that we are just exactly where we were, except that we know that there was a cart in the case. We know, of course, what was in the cart. Christine must have been in it—somewhere under that filthy rubber rug—and——"

"Pardon me. I did not say that the problem was *who* was in the cart, but *what* was in the cart."

"We do not need to quibble about words."

But Mr. Torrance rose in uncontrollable agitation. "Why, Mark, don't you see what he means? What if—if——"

Mark shrank back as though he feared a blow.

"Not that," he said hoarsely. "You don't mean to imply that she may have been already dead?"

The detective nodded sympathetically.

"Not that it's my own opinion that she was," he added. "My own view is that she was alive, but was prevented from making any outcry—drugged, most likely."

"She could not have been drugged when she hid the glove?"

"No; yet at that time she was undoubtedly alive but not able to call for help; gagged, perhaps, or terrified by threats into silence. But, even granting

that, they may have drugged her before attempting to remove her. It would be a natural thing to do."

Mr. Torrance turned a haggard face upon him.

"But if she were dead—that would account for everything."

"Not quite everything, I think. In fact, I do not like that hypothesis at all. But one has to look at these cases from every side. I *believe* she was alive. For one thing, if it had been otherwise there would have been some trace in the room; for another thing, this man, from what I have been able to learn, does not sound like a murderer. The old woman's capable of anything—crazy, I verily believe; but the man seems to be merely a good-for-nothing unless crazed with drink. The men who spoke to him are sure that he was himself upon that night."

Mark drew a long breath.

"I agree with you," he said; "besides, I think we may safely place some dependence on what the letters say. The old fiend does not wish Christine dead; it would not suit her plan of revenge. She is alive, I am sure of it; but in danger that drives me mad to think of. Johnson, when we solve the second problem, she will be safe. How are we going to do it?"

The detective fidgeted.

"I'll admit that we are up against it," he said. "Given a dark night with rain, the fact that two people drive away with a horse and cart, and that the horse and cart were returned in fairly good condition next day at noon—that is really all we have to go upon. I think we may be reasonably sure that the young lady was in the cart, and that the journey taken by the horse was not a very long one. Therefore we face two possibilities: either the kidnappers are con-

ceeded somewhere within a radius of, say, fifteen miles (more likely ten) or they drove to some small station within that radius, and from there took the train for parts unknown. Do you agree with me that far?"

"It sounds likely."

"Now, there are several such small stations near this city, and it is quite on the cards that we may pick up the trail from any one of them. They ought to have been a somewhat noticeable party. If the girl was drugged, or even half-dazed, they would probably represent her as an invalid. As few invalids travel, they would be remembered on that account alone. Of course, it is possible that the girl was not drugged, but merely terrified into silence."

"I do not believe that would be possible," said Mark. "Miss Christine is too clever and too quick to have submitted tamely to intimidation, and they are too clever to have dared to risk it."

"I agree with you," said Mr. Torrance, emphatically.

"You are probably right, but, as I believe I have remarked before, one must look at every possibility. At any rate, I have men now dispatched to every station within a possible radius—on trains, or in motor-cars, whichever would get them there quickest. If there is a vestige of a clue, one of them will be pretty sure of finding it. It seems slow work, I know, but it is thorough, and I really do not see what else we can do."

"When ought the reports of your men to come in?"

"Almost any moment. They were to 'phone results immediately, and most of them ought to have reached their destination by this time. I took the liberty of

telling them to 'phone directly here, so that you might have the news as soon as I have. I think that is a call now."

"No news from Frampton," he told them, putting up the receiver after a brief dialogue with someone the other end. "The agent there is positive that no one bought any ticket or took any train upon the night in question. The through trains do not stop there, and passengers are few."

For half an hour the three men sat there while call after call came in, each reporting, for one reason or another, no trace of the fugitives. The detective's face grew graver as time went on. It was evident that he had expected some result from this inquiry. Mark, on the other hand, seemed distinctly cheered.

"If they didn't get away," he kept saying, "then they are still somewhere near. The real danger is that they may have reached New York or some other large city where search would be hunting for a needle in a haystack. Besides, there is that last letter. It was slipped into the letter-box under cover of darkness. Depend upon it, either one of the kidnappers must have placed it there; they would not trust a third party. And where one is, the other is. They would keep together; and where they are, Christine is."

"Good reasoning," agreed the detective, "but it won't help much without a tangible clue. There is still the Dalby man to hear from. I sent our best man there, for, as the five o'clock through train will stop for passengers, it seemed the most likely place, and——"

The sharp tinkle of the call bell interrupted him.

"There is your man now," said Mark.

Johnson picked up the receiver eagerly, and a

hurried consultation followed. The detective's eyes were bright as he turned from the instrument.

"He's coming here," he announced. "He thinks he's picked up the trail—at least, he says he has some curious information."

"And didn't say what it was?"

"No; but he'll be here in fifteen minutes. It's a good bit of road between here and Dalby."

"Dalby!" said Mark, and he sighed heavily as he remembered the last drive he had taken on the Dalby road.

CHAPTER XXX

THE MAN FROM DALBY

THE detective from Dalby proved to be a young man with a fresh, ingenuous face, whose rounded innocence was somewhat belied by a pair of very keen grey eyes. He was evidently properly impressed with the importance of his mission, but not unduly so. In fact, the three men—for Tommy had arrived a moment or so before him—were favourably impressed upon the instant.

"Would you like my evidence first, or shall I begin by stating my conclusions?" he asked his chief deferentially.

"Your evidence, of course," said the big detective; and the others, who would have liked the conclusions first, were compelled to stay their impatience as best they might.

"I had some difficulty in fixing the right night in the mind of the agent at Dalby," he said, "but finally he got his bearings by remembering that, upon the date mentioned, his youngest child had been sick with the toothache. He is sure of the date because the next day was the kid's birthday, and she cried because she was afraid she would not be able to eat her box of candy. Well, upon that night he very well remembers a horse and cart driving up at about a quarter to five in good time for the through express. He did not see who

drove the cart, but the passengers were an ugly old woman and a young girl——”

Mark interrupted with a smothered exclamation, and the young detective paused a moment, but as no one made a remark, he went on :

“There is no doubt about the old woman. The agent saw her face plainly in the lighted waiting-room and recognised the photo at once. But the young girl he did not see. It had stopped raining and was not cold, so he saw nothing strange in the girl staying outside in the air. She was seated on a bench at the end of the building, out of the range of the lamps. She seemed too ill or too weary to rise, and the old woman said that she was not well and that she was taking her to New York to consult a specialist. The only thing he noticed about the girl was that she had yellow or very light hair. The old woman’s clothes were decent, though plain and a very bad fit, being much too big.”

“Borrowed, probably,” interrupted Johnson.

“She did not buy tickets for New York or for any place. She said she had her tickets already, but she made no secret of her destination and indeed talked a great deal and gave her plans with a lot of unnecessary detail. The two went off on the five o’clock express, and that would have been the end of them except for the evidence of the station agent’s sister. This sister, it seems, was going to Buffalo by the same train. She very nearly missed it, arriving at the last moment and boarding it in a great hurry. Neither she nor the old woman were provided with berths, and they found seats in the same car.

“Now, the station agent’s sister returned from Buffalo only the day before yesterday, and last night was asked by the station agent’s wife to tea. During the meal the

agent happened to speak about the old woman and the invalid girl, and asked his sister if the poor thing had been taken worse on the train. In reply he learned the following curious facts :

"First, the sister had noticed the couple very particularly, as they were the only travellers who boarded the train with her, and the old woman was noticeably ugly. But, strangely enough, she did not get the impression of the girl being an invalid. She seemed, she said, quite ordinarily strong. She wore a veil over her face, but her hair was very yellow. Note particularly that the sister was absolutely convinced that the hair was *bleached*. I questioned her myself upon this point, and she grew quite angry when I suggested a mistake. She said no one *could* mistake bleached hair !

"Second, the two did not go to New York at all, but left the train at Hamstead, which is only about twenty miles from Dalby ! She is sure of this ; indeed, as the couple had interested her from the first, she is hardly likely to be mistaken. It was still dark when the train ran into Hamstead, but she saw the two pass under the station lamps, making their way to the exit gate. The girl now wore a veil over her yellow hair as well as over her face, but she walked quite easily and did not appear ill in the least. That, sir, is all the evidence."

The detective gave a long whistle, but before he could reply, Mark, noting the eagerness in the young fellow's face, insisted they should hear his conclusions before beginning to discuss the matter themselves.

"Well, sir," said the young fellow modestly, "the conclusions are fairly obvious. It would seem, in the first place, that the old woman deliberately tried to make the agent believe that she was bound for New York ; that she purposely called his attention to the

alleged helpless state of the young girl; that she purposely left the girl's yellow hair uncovered that the agent might notice it. Therefore the old woman wished to establish a trail for a young lady with yellow hair, which, if investigation occurred, would lead to New York. It would seem also that the young woman was not as ill as the old one made out, and, further, that she was on friendly terms with her companion. Also, in my opinion, it is fairly certain that her yellow hair was bleached. It is not likely that another woman would make a mistake in that matter, especially as the missing lady's hair is remarkable for its natural beauty of colouring. Therefore, I conclude that the young person in the train was not the lady we are seeking, but one merely intended to represent her and thereby aid in establishing a misleading trail. It seems, further, that the two undoubtedly alighted at Hamstead. And why not? It was not necessary to go to New York, it was only necessary to seem to go there. The accident of the presence of the agent's sister in the train could not have been foreseen. If you remember, she came at the last moment and got on in a great hurry so that the other two did not see her, or, if they did, it would not occur to them that she was any connection of the agent's. If we had only the evidence of the agent, we might very possibly have concluded that our quarry had cleared for New York, taking the half-stupefied girl with her. The old hag knew that the agent would never notice that the girl's hair was bleached!"

"I think you have thought it out very reasonably," said Mark. "It all seems to fit together like pieces of a puzzle. And the conclusion of the whole thing is——"

"It is rather early for any conclusion yet," declared Mr. Johnson, who, like other successful artists, was

not without jealousy. "Still, I suppose it will do no harm to hear what he thinks."

"I think," said the young detective, "that the missing lady is concealed somewhere close at hand, probably between here and Dalby."

"Bravo!" said Mark. "I feel sure of it."

"And the young person with the bleached hair?" asked Mr. Torrance.

"She must be partly in the secret, and she ought to be easy to trace. My own guess—it's only a guess—would be that she probably belongs to the house where the missing lady is concealed."

"Hum! Well, guessing is not going to help us," said Mr. Johnson rather sourly. "What we want to do is to spot all the possible places of concealment within a ten-mile radius of Dalby—that is, if there is anything in your theories." He drew from his pocket a large paper map which he spread upon the library table. "Here is a road map. It is a special map made under my own supervision. Every house is marked with a few illuminative notes in cipher. Now, then, we will first take the straight Dalby road. It doesn't look likely. See, these houses set along it at reasonably frequent intervals are all farmhouses belonging to old residents; not much chance of hiding a kidnapped girl in any of them, eh? This is the toll-house, kept by a respectable old couple. It consists of one room and a bedroom, a rat could hardly be hidden there. This is the Dalby road inn. It is quite well known as a stopping-place for motors. They give quite a decent country lunch there. I've often tried it myself. It is kept by a very respectable woman, by name Haffey, with a pretty granddaughter. I am convinced that they would not lend themselves——"

"Excuse me," interrupted the young detective diffidently, "but those people are no longer in charge of the inn. They left about a month ago and are now living in Hamstead."

"How do you know that?" snapped Johnson.

"I—well, you see, I know Miss Haffey rather well. She is, as you say, a remarkably pretty girl."

"Oh, I see, sweethearts! Well, that accounts for it. Perhaps you know who keeps the inn now?"

"No, I have never been there since Mrs. Haffey and Fanny left. I only know that they sold out for a good sum. Stay, though, I came by there to-day in the motor. We were going very fast, but I naturally looked at the house. There was someone at the side door scattering the grain for the chickens. It was a woman. I couldn't see much of her." Suddenly he jumped to his feet with a startled exclamation. "By the lord Harry!" he cried. "She had *yellow hair*!"

"What?"

"How stupid of me never to think of it. Of course, she had yellow hair! It was the only noticeable thing about her. I remember thinking that at a distance it might almost be Fanny, but Fanny's hair was dark brown. This girl's was yellow, startlingly yellow!"

Mark had also risen. He was very pale. "It looks like a clue," he said. "If it is——" he locked the young man's hands in his own with a grip that spoke volumes.

"Plenty of girls have yellow hair," said Johnson the complacent; "so don't get excited. However, we'll soon know about this one. Think you can tell bleached hair when you see it, Cunningham?"

"I think I can, sir," said the young detective modestly.

"Well, you and I will run down to the inn at once——"

But Mark, who had been talking excitedly with Mr. Torrance, interrupted him without ceremony.

"We think that that would be very unwise," he said. "There is always a chance that you may be known to be a detective. If they are as sharp as they seem to be they might have time to get away. Wouldn't it be better for me to go alone in my own motor, as I have some dozens of times before?"

"I do not think so. If they know Mr. Torrance, isn't it likely that they will know you? Besides, you are a sick man yet and these people are dangerous. If it came to a struggle, what chance would you have?"

Mark slipped a serviceable pistol out of his pocket. "I'm a dead shot," he said cheerfully. "I wouldn't need to commit murder in order to effectually disable any undesirable opponent. And I feel quite sure that they will not be on their guard against me. I am known to be a sort of useless fellow, and I have been back from Europe for such a short time—most of which I spent in Vancouver—that it is ten to one against their knowing me by sight. Besides—well, the other is a sentimental reason."

"Let's have it, anyway."

"Well, you see, the one ride Miss Christine and I took together was along that very road and to that very inn. I showed her a way to make the motor-horn, which is out of order, scream like a banshee. If she is anywhere in that inn she would remember the sound of it, I am sure. That would put her on the watch for some way to help us. She would recognise my voice also if I could get within hearing distance; and," bluntly, "I do not think that any one of you—except

the governor, whom they know by sight—could possibly have the thing at heart quite as I have.”

“Think we might fall down on the job, do you?” grinned the big detective. “But there may be something in what you say. Only there must be a modification of the plan. You do not realise how desperate these people will be. Now, how long do you think you will need to convince yourself whether or not the girl is in the house?”

“Half an hour—twenty minutes ought to do it.”

“It would certainly give the thing away if you loafed longer than that. Well, then, in twenty minutes a second motor will be on hand, and in it will be reinforcements—Mr. Torrance, Mr. Burns, Cunningham and myself. We will go by the side roads, so as to come upon the inn quickly. I’ll have a search warrant. If you think the lady is there, give us the signal. Then everything will depend upon our quickness. There is a risk. If we are not quick and quiet and sure—well, you know as well as I do that we may not find her alive. The old woman is crazy; she will stick at nothing.”

“Very well,” said Mark briefly. “Benson, order the motor—the old one with the horn that is out of order. And remember, gentlemen, I want twenty minutes clear before you interrupt me.”

They shook hands with him gravely. When they heard the motor drive off, Mr. Johnson took out his watch and laid it upon the table.

“We have twenty minutes, gentlemen,” he said, “and, if you don’t mind, I’ll get a wink of sleep.”

CHAPTER XXXI

THE GABLE ROOM

THE next thing which Christine remembered, after being carried through the vaguely familiar door, was a sense of violent sickness. She was so ill and her head was so confused that she did not care where she was or what was happening. She was in a poorly lighted room, and there were other people there also, but that was all she knew before, the violence of the sickness over, she sank again into the healing unconsciousness of sleep. When she awoke she felt better, only very tired, very thirsty, and acutely aware of sore lips and aching mouth. She looked around her in bewilderment. She was lying, fully dressed, upon a small camp-bed in a strange room with very low sides and a ceiling which in the centre sloped upwards into a peak. High up in the wall, directly under the peak, was a small window, partly open. It was a room that she had never seen before, and she lay for a moment idly speculating about it. Then her sleep-filled eyes fell upon a bundle tied up in a dirty pillow-case lying on the floor, and, with a rush, memory came back.

It had not been a terrible nightmare, after all! With a half sob the poor girl raised herself and looked around with frightened eyes. There was nothing very

terrible to be seen : just a bare, oddly shaped room—a store room, evidently, for against both of the low side walls stood chests or wardrobes, and there were old trunks in the corners. Save for the wardrobes and the camp-bed upon which Christine lay, there was absolutely no furniture in the room but a couple of rickety chairs. The one small window in the peak let in plenty of light and air. There were two doors : one small one at the back of the room where the wall was very low, and one larger one in the side between the two wardrobes. Christine's eyes were still upon this door when it opened, and a young girl came in carrying a basin of water, a cake of soap, and a towel.

"I thought you might like a wash when you woke up," she said, in a matter-of-fact tone; and, pulling one of the chairs, she arranged the basin upon it within reach of the bed.

Christine's heart gave a great bound of relief. Here was help at last!

"Oh!" she said—for, though speaking was difficult on account of her sore mouth, the gag had been removed. "Oh, I have been so frightened!"

The girl made no reply—did not seem even interested; and, with quick disappointment, Christine noticed that she was not a nice kind of girl at all. In the first place, she was not so young as she dressed; her face was hard, her eyes were lack-lustre, and her hair was terribly and undeniably bleached.

"You had better get up and take off that rain-coat," she remarked. "But wait." She went to the door and called, waited a moment, and came back again with the man of last night's nightmare beside her. "She may as well get her coat and things off," she said to

him. "You had better take charge of them and of these." She indicated the pillow-case bundle.

Fully awake now, Christine's brain worked quickly. They were going to take everything away from her—everything that might leave a trace. Almost instinctively she felt for the bottle in her pocket, and while the girl talked to the man she managed to slip it, unseen, inside her blouse.

"There is only one glove," said the man, "and some bottles and a handkerchief in the rain-coat pocket. Feel if they are still there."

The girl put her hand in the pocket and felt the bottles of glycerine and rose-water.

"They are here all right," she declared, and, not unkindly, she raised Christine and helped her to slip off the rain-coat and the one remaining glove. Then she quietly unfastened the little gold pin which held her collar, removed the collar itself, removed Christine's belt, and slipped the little turquoise ring off her finger. "I think we would notice at once if any of the other things were missing," she said, with a vulgar giggle. The man nodded, and, taking the things and the bundle upon the floor, went out. The girl stayed, sitting upon the other chair and watching Christine impassively while she washed.

"You have pretty hair," she remarked suddenly, "but I think mine is a little more yellow, if anything."

"It is very yellow," said Christine. The wash had done her good, the long sleep had quietened her overstrained nerves, and her courage was beginning to come back. "What time is it?" she asked.

"About noon. You slept all morning."

"Where am I?" demanded Christine.

"It doesn't matter, does it?"

"Why was I brought here, and what is wanted of me?"

"You can search me."

"When am I to be allowed to go home?"

"I'm sure I don't know." The girl stifled a yawn.

"See here," said Christine. "You must know that I am here against my will. When my friends find me it will mean penal servitude for you."

"Yes?"

"Yes. And they are certain to find me."

"Think so?"

"You are a girl like myself"—it was not true, but Christine stretched the point—"and you can't want any harm to come to me. If you will help me to get away I'll guarantee that you shall go unpunished, and that you will receive a reward."

"Your folks are rich, are they?" drawled the girl.

"They are rich enough to pay you."

"Sorry—but there's nothing doing."

"You refuse to help me?"

"Do you want something to eat?" The girl was evidently tired of the conversation. Christine realised that further appeal was useless, and as she was exceedingly hungry, said so.

"Well, I'll bring up breakfast. But let me give you a tip. Don't call out—not that it will make any difference, but Granny will tie your mouth up again if you do." She went out giggling, and Christine heard the key turn in the lock.

Left alone she did not lose any time. First, she examined the small door. It was strong and securely locked, and it opened apparently upon the roof of

another portion of the house, for there was fresh air coming in through the crack at the bottom. Climbing upon a chair, Christine found that she could bring her eyes upon a level with the window-sill, but the outside ledge was broad and she could not see over it. All that she could see was sky and trees, but from the quietness and the tinkle of a cow-bell, she knew she must be in the country. If she could drag the bed over to the window, and stand the chair upon it, she might be able to see more. The bed was light and easy to move; it was not much trouble to push it under the window. Quickly she placed the chair upon it and mounted. It seemed almost too good to be true. She could see out now, over the outside ledge. Beneath her ran a long, white road, thickly lined with maples in the full glory of late autumn. With a sob of remembrance, she thought of her childish play with Celia—"Sister Ann, Sister Ann, do you see anyone coming?" It seemed that she could almost hear Celia's voice replying, "Only the long road and the swaying grass and the dust before the wind."

But there was someone coming! Far off down the road a buggy was approaching—a country top-buggy drawn by a heavy farm horse going very slowly. Christine caught her breath. Oh, if it would only hurry!

"Do you want me to lift you down?" inquired a sarcastic voice behind her.

Instinctively she drew in her head, and the next moment she was lifted off her swaying chair and deposited, not too gently, on the floor. Then, without a look at her or a word, the man drew the bed away, and, mounting on the chair, began securing the window with an oblong of close lattice-work which fitted the

frame exactly, and which he very quickly screwed in securely.

"It is only wood," he said as he stepped down, "but it's strong wood. Two like you could not budge it, and I advise you not to try. If you're caught at the window again, you will have to be—well, we'll see that you don't get a second chance."

Christine, who had watched his cool proceedings with rage and despair, made no reply, and, the girl entering at that moment with the tray, the man, with a surly nod, gathered up his tools and departed.

The girl looked at the lattice with a laugh.

"Got birdie's cage fixed at last!" she said. "Was birdie peeping out? By the way, there is a farmer coming. He may stop here. I'll wait until he is safely away. If you scream, Bill will have to fix the gag."

Christine attempted to eat, and drank her tea feverishly, but all the time her ears were strained to hear the sound of the farmer's buggy. It came at last. Someone called "Whoa!" The farmer had decided upon getting out. Christine could hear his heavy tread in the porch below. Suddenly she gathered herself together and—screamed.

At least, she tried to scream. She put all her remaining strength into one mighty effort, but the first thread of sound had hardly passed her bruised lips when the girl's hand was over her mouth. The door opened, as if the man had been waiting there, and in a moment she was securely gagged.

"Got some spunk, I see!" said the man, gazing at her for the first time with something like admiration in his eyes. "Lucky for you this tavern isn't doing

the business it used to, or you'd be wearing that ornament about all the time."

Christine heard the farmer come out, climb into his buggy, and call "Ged up!" The old horse and rattling rig moved slowly away, and with it seemed to go the girl's last hope. Careless of the giggling regard of the yellow-haired girl, she threw herself on the bed and gave way to hysterical weeping.

CHAPTER XXXII

CHECKMATE !

UPON that first day in the gable room, Christine, in a flush of hope, had told the yellow-haired girl that her friends would certainly find her soon. She had believed it, too, for it seemed impossible that such an outrage could have been perpetrated and remain undiscovered and unavenged in this commonplace age of the world's history. If she had been a kidnapped maiden in mediæval times, shut up in a high tower, guarded by men-at-arms with appropriate stage settings, there might have been some element of reality in the affair; but to be snatched up suddenly from a busy city street at the glorious beginning of the twentieth century, to be imprisoned in an ordinary road hotel, in an ordinary gable room, within a very few miles, she felt convinced, of her own home, and to be as completely helpless, as utterly isolated, and in as certain a danger as that other mediæval maiden, seemed a thing too fantastic to think about.

And yet, as day succeeded day, the truth of this unbelievable fact crept into the girl's soul. From angry wonder and childish petulance, she passed to frightened misgiving, from frightened misgiving to terrified apprehension. The sinister purpose of these people was in the air. She did not know what it was, but she read its signs in the careless giggle and vulgar jest

of the yellow-haired girl; in the hard determination of the girl's mother, whom she seldom saw, but who was apparently the mistress of the house; in the continual watchfulness of the man, and, most of all, in the evil gloating of the old woman, who she now found out was called Granny Bates. This sinister old hag was with her more and more as the days dragged by. Usually she spoke little, but sometimes she would mutter and mumble to herself, and more than once she had a raving fit, during which she screamed out at Christine a torrent of abuse and vituperation, of which, happily, the girl did not know the meaning. At other times, again, she would seem to forget the girl, and sit for hours talking to and weeping over a faded photograph. The photo was that of a young girl of about Christine's age, with a pretty, silly face and much tawdry ornament.

"As good a girl as ever lived," the old woman would murmur, "and pretty, too, as pretty as the best of them. Always laughing, and so kind to her old mother—a good girl—a good girl."

"She's dead now," she said one day, looking at Christine with unseeing eyes. "But there was nothing the matter. I'll take my oath on that. She died of peemony—on her lungs, you know." And then, suddenly, as if the pretences were too much for her, she gathered the picture into her arms and rocked it passionately, moaning, "Ruined, ruined! As good a girl as ever lived! And so pretty, so young! Dead! They killed her. Oh, see her white dead face—so pretty, so pretty!" She burst into hard sobs, and Christine, startled and shocked into pure pity, came over to her, murmuring words of sympathy. But at her touch the old woman sprang up with a curse so

terrible that the poor girl shrank back appalled. The man, who was, as usual, not far from the door, heard, and, coming in, took the woman away.

"Don't you go near her when she's like that," he warned Christine. "She'd just as lief kill you as not, and we don't want that to happen."

The last words were uttered with a kind of rough sincerity, which, together with the look accompanying them, made Christine vaguely aware of a new danger. It made her realise that of late the man, who at first had been utterly careless, had gradually changed in his manner towards her. The change had begun with that admiring glance bestowed upon her when she had tried to scream for help. From that on he had taken more notice of her, had been kind in his vulgar way, and stood as a buffer between her and the old woman's worst rages. But Christine was under no misapprehension as to the nature of his regard. She knew it for what it was: a menace and not a refuge. Once, in desperation, she appealed to him. He laughed, not unkindly, but in a way which killed every hope.

Between him and the old woman, Christine knew, was continual war. Evidently she wanted something of him which he refused to give. By turns she stormed, entreated and cajoled. He met her always with an unmoved refusal. In this refusal, Christine realised vaguely, lay her safety. But was she mistaken, or did his attitude grow less assured as the days went by?

One day, after she had been in the gable room for over a week, the yellow-haired girl, with cheerful malice, told her of the false trail which had been laid, and which, in the unlikely event of her friends tracing her, would lead them far away to New York. Christine did not question the truth of her words, and from that

moment she began to droop : she lost her appetite, her interest in everything ; she no longer listened for a familiar voice at the inn door. For the most part she lay upon the bed, staring with unseeing eyes at the sloping ceiling. This change was watched by the yellow-haired girl with complacency, and by the man with uneasiness. It is doubtful if the old woman noticed it at all. Christine herself, morbid and half starved, began to think that it would be quite easy to slip out of life this way.

But she was to be forcibly aroused from her indifference. One day, toward the end of the fortnight, the man came into her room alone, and after carefully ascertaining that no one was outside or upon the stairs, shut and locked the door. He came over to her with a sheepish grin upon his common, rather handsome, face.

"See here," he began at once, "this has got to stop. The old woman is determined to have all or nothing, and I'm tired of going on like this. All the same, I said I wouldn't harm you, and I don't want to. You and me must get the best of the old woman, that's all ! I'll tell you what—I've thought it all out. We'll let her think—what she wants to think, and we'll go away together. But I'll swear to do fair by you after. We'll get married by the first parson we find !"

Christine sat up, slow horror brightening in her eyes and flooding the pale cheeks with crimson. "What do you mean ?" She could hardly gasp the words.

"What I say. I'll marry you fair and regular. You'll be Mrs. Wilson as tight as a wedding-ring can make you. We'll have the laugh on the old woman—eh ?"

But Christine, in the first moment of actual realisation, had fallen backward in a dead faint.

"Guess I was a trifle sudden," said the man ruefully. He went out awkwardly and sent in the girl.

It was when she recovered from the swoon that Christine first thought of the little bottle tucked inside her dress—and remembered, with relief unspeakable, that it was poison! To gain a respite she pretended to be much more helpless than she was. She refused to talk to anyone, and ate scarcely enough to keep herself alive. But Tough Wilson's patience would not stand this long. He forced the question to an issue, and this time no fortunate fainting fit concealed the young girl's rage and loathing. When he left the room she knew that he had become dangerous. The yellow-haired girl also told her cynically that Bill was going to have a "spell." He had begun to drink, and in drink he was a devil! The old woman was openly exultant and kept whispering to the faded photograph that soon she would be avenged—soon—soon!

At last there came a day when Christine said: "If he does not come to-day, he will come too late." (Through it all she had clung to a thread of blind faith in Mark.)

Wilson had been in to see her that morning, smelling strongly of whisky and with red fire in his eyes. Once more he had urged his proposal, and she had not answered him a word. He went out quietly, but she knew that he was at the end of his self-control. She felt the cold glass of the bottle with her hot fingers—and waited!

It was a beautiful morning. The sun shone, the air was crisp with the tang of last night's frost. Some late birds sang. It was a good day for motors, and, as the

jailers were too busy to watch her, Christine, after the early visit of the man, had been securely, but not painfully, gagged. She lay now looking up through the window at the cloud-flecked sky, thinking of nothing, in a kind of stunned quiet.

Suddenly there rose from the road outside a piercing, long-drawn, elfish scream ! Its first note brought Christine upright on her bed. When it had died away in a choking gurgle she was on her knees, sobbing, beneath the open window. She knew that scream—some time, long ago, a merry girl had pressed that broken bulb, and laughed at its fiendish echo. It was Mark's motor-horn !

And then she heard his voice (very loud, it seemed) at the inn door, and his step upon the porch. He had come !

As she knelt there, weeping, the door behind her quietly opened, and the man and the old woman came in. They said nothing, but, picking the girl up as if she had been a parcel, they laid her on the bed, as they had done upon the first night, wrapping her skirts about her ankles, and securing them firmly. In the moment that they needed for this Christine had found and uncorked the bottle of carbolic, saturating her clothes and filling the air with the odour.

"What's that smell?" asked the man in a whisper.

"Be quiet. I don't smell anything." Indeed, the old woman had lost her sense of smell long ago.

"It's carbolic ! Have they been cleaning up here?"

"Maybe. Be quiet !" In silence they fastened the girl's hands by her side and tied a fresh knot in the gag. What were they going to do?

She was not left long in doubt. The old woman moved quickly to the great clothes press and wardrobe

by the far wall and threw open the doors. The upper part of the interior was a mass of indescribable litter, but the bottom was a chest, with a lid, which the old woman lifted, disclosing a perfectly empty space, quite large enough to conceal a slight girl like Christine. They were going to put her in there—they were going to smother her!

"Are the air-holes big enough?" asked the man.

The old woman nodded. "I saw to that. I didn't want her dead. Here, lift her in." (She was not to smother, then!)

Wilson hesitated for an instant. "Are you sure it's the man?" he asked.

"Sure! Would I make a mistake? He's Torrance's adopted son, and he knows the girl, too. I saw them together once. What are you waiting for?"

Whatever it was, he waited no longer, and together they lifted Christine and placed her in the long, coffin-like chest. Then with deft hands they covered her with old clothes and litter from the top of the cupboard. Her face they covered lightly, but in such manner that no trace of human outline showed. "It will be pretty hot when the lid goes down," said the man, loudly enough for the girl to hear, "but you can't smother; the air-holes are free."

"Leave the lid up until the last moment," he commanded the woman. "It may be a false alarm. What were you doing in the hall? What makes you think he caught a glimpse of you?"

"I saw his face," snapped the old woman. "I tell you he's on the scent. But he'll never get her—I'll see to that!"

After this ominous remark there was strained silence.

Ten, fifteen minutes passed! Christine fought to

keep herself from swooning. If Mark were near, she must help him! But she could hear nothing now. Only she knew that he had not gone away.

Twenty minutes! There was a whir of another motor upon the road. The man sprang to the window, and turned back again with chalk-white face. "It's Torrance!" he whispered, "and Johnson, the detective. If they find her, it's all up!"

"They won't find her!" In an instant, while the man stood there stupefied with his own fears, the old woman slipped from behind him. Before he could spring upon her she had drawn something from her dress and struck through the open lid of the chest—downwards!

The man flung her from him upon the floor. "If you've killed her, I'll do for you," he said almost quietly. But the first step he took toward the chest was stayed by a confused murmur of sounds from below. Doors opened and shut—there were steps upon the stairs. "Too late!" he muttered. "Here, let's get out of this!" He closed the lid of the chest gently and swung to the doors. The old woman scrambled to her feet. The steps and voices of the searchers were now distinctly audible.

Very quickly the man and woman unlocked the small door in the wall, and disappeared through it into the sunlight on the roof!

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE RED SPOT

WHEN his car had swung lightly in at the inn door, and the long screech of its wailing horn had died away, Mark lived through a moment of intensest expectation. He hardly knew what he expected, but anything could have happened without surprising him. In some vague way he had thought of himself as a modern Jack the Giant Killer winding the enchanted horn before the castle of the imprisoned princess. In that adventure, one remembers, the gates immediately fell open, and the princess herself appeared smiling upon the threshold. But in this adventure only Mrs. Hornby appeared upon the threshold, and she was not smiling. It seemed to Mark that there was a veiled hostility in her manner. However, he doffed his cap to her courteously, and asked in an unnecessarily loud voice if she could serve him with luncheon. The woman replied, curtly enough, that she could, but he noticed that she did not move aside at once to let him enter. She was a big woman, and, coming as he did from the bright sun into the shade of the porch, he could not see very clearly past her into the still darker hall. But eyes sharpened by love and expectation are keen, and in the moment during which he confronted the immovable barrier of her stout person, he saw something—a glimpse, a fleeting vision of a face behind her, a

face indescribably ugly! His heart gave a great leap and then began to beat with sickening rapidity. Once before, under a street lamp, he had seen that face! The certainty that he was upon the right track unmanned him more than any disappointment would have done, and he grasped at the trellis of the porch to steady himself. Nevertheless, he managed to reply lightly to the landlady's unnecessary remarks about the weather and the state of the roads, and the next moment was able to follow her through the now empty hall into the pleasant old dining-room where he and the lost girl had had their merry meal together.

It all looked different now; the atmosphere was changed, the charm departed. Instead of the rosy country girl who had waited upon them before, there was a waitress of the worst city type—pallid, hard, wearily indifferent. But (Mark's heart leapt again as he saw it) this particular waitress had an astonishing head of very yellow hair!

In one corner of the room a solitary bicyclist, busy with fried ham and eggs, looked up and nodded.

Returning the friendly nod, Mark drew a chair and sat down at a near-by table. The waitress, with a bored air, dropped a menu before him, and stood by superciliously while he pretended to study it.

"Not like the grub one used to get here, is it?" asked the friendly bicyclist, unmindful of the listening girl.

"I have not been here since the inn changed hands," said Mark, "but I used to know it well, and one was always sure of a good meal."

"That's so!" with enthusiasm. "Old lady Haffey kept a good chop, and knew how to serve it—only decent thing you get now is ham and eggs." Then,

as Mark had given a hurried order, and the girl had left the room, he dropped his voice and said with a confidential wink: "What I would like to know is how they make it pay? Must be some way. They're not here for their health. Say, isn't that girl a corker?"

"It depends," said Mark, who was talking against time, "upon what you mean by 'corker.'"

"Oh, well, you can see what sort she is, can't you? What's she doing out here in the country?"

"Her health, perhaps."

The bicyclist laughed and applied himself to a remaining egg. "These eggs are fresh, though. Did you order eggs?"

"I—really—I don't know what I did order—just anything."

"You'll get that all right."

"Do you know this house well? It seems a picturesque old place."

"Yes, it is; darned picturesque. It must have been built at a time when they never made a room square if they could possibly put a twist in it or lop off a corner. The rooms upstairs are all kind of shapes, and there are little rooms higher up in each of the gables with windows set so high that you'd need a chair to see out."

"Very interesting," said Mark, spilling some salt on the tablecloth and carefully heaping it into little mounds.

"Think so? I don't like that kind of thing myself. Are you motoring alone?"

"No—that is—yes, of course." Mark glanced at his watch and found that he had still ten minutes to wait. Why, oh why, had he asked for twenty minutes? He

had found out all he wanted to know in the first glance—the old woman, the yellow-haired girl—there could scarcely be any possibility of being on the wrong track. And if they had by any chance recognised him, what might not be done in twenty minutes? What might be happening even now?

He jumped to his feet in uncontrollable impatience.

“Oh, don’t get the jumps,” advised the bicyclist. “They take their own time in serving here. If you ordered fried chicken, they’ll have to catch the bird first.” He laughed at this ancient jest with hearty appreciation.

“It’s very quiet here,” said Mark. “Do they keep no boarders?”

“That’s it,” said the other. “Do they? I’ve never seen anybody round at this time of day except that girl and the landlady and the chore man.”

“What’s the chore man like?”

“Just like any other chore man.”

Mark glanced at his watch again. Five minutes yet. Should he begin the search alone? No, he dared not risk a failure. But why had he asked for twenty minutes?

“Say, you are in a hurry, aren’t you? That’s what comes of motors. They give a man the jumps. Great road for motors, this—here comes another, a big one. See! They’re making the dust fly.”

Mark did not wait to look. He sprang for the door, nearly knocking down the girl who was coming back with a loaded tray. Unable to control himself another moment, he flung all caution to the winds and rushed down the passage, pushing the stout landlady aside as carelessly as if she had been a bag of meal. His white face in the door was all the signal that the others needed.

With businesslike promptitude, Johnson produced the warrant.

"Now, then," he said to the heavily protesting Mrs. Hornby, "we're here to search; there's no use having words about it. No good comes of resisting the law, you know."

In the hall his directions were brief and to the point:

"Cunningham, watch the back and side doors. Burns, stay here by the front. Don't let this woman move. Mr. Torrance, go through every room on the ground floor. Mr. Mark and I will take the upstairs. If any of you need help, whistle. If I whistle come as quickly as possible."

Before he had finished Mark was half-way up the stairs. The landlady had ceased her protests, and there seemed an absolute silence in the house. Upon the upper landing the door of the hotel parlour alone stood open, all the other doors were bafflingly alike.

"Do not let us waste time here," urged Mark, seeing the detective produce a formidable bunch of keys. "There are gable rooms higher up, a man told me. Look! there is the stair."

"Get your pistol ready, then. It's a bad stair for a fight. And let me go first—I must, you fool. The door is closed, and I may have to break it in."

The door at the head of the narrow stair, however, was not locked. It opened easily, and the two men found themselves in a small, dark entry with a door at each side of them. Mark sprang for one door and the detective for the other—both opened without trouble, and both led into empty rooms. The rooms themselves were very similar—store-rooms, evidently, though in

each of them stood a small camp-bed, for use, probably, in times of overcrowding.

The blank disappointment on Mark's face was reflected upon that of the detective, but almost as they turned to rush downstairs again a breath of wind from the open window brought an odour, faint yet unmistakable, from the left-hand room.

The two men paused as if a voice had called them.

"Carbolic!" whispered Mark. "She has been here!"

The detective sniffed the air like a pointer. "Yes," he admitted, "and not long ago—and look! the window is barred! But where is she?"

Mark pointed silently to the little door in the low side-wall. It was partly open.

"There," he said. "They have gone that way—while I waited downstairs. We've lost her!"

The big detective shoved him unceremoniously down upon a chair, and opening the little door, looked out. There was bright sunshine on the roof, and some pigeons cooed by the old red chimneys. No one was in sight. A little to one side, and in the shadow of one of the projecting gables, a strong ladder leaned against the eave. The detective peered over gingerly. Its lower end dropped straight into some shrubbery, which, in its turn, straggled away to the good-sized bit of maple and beech wood which made such a picturesque background for the picturesque old house.

"A clean get-away!" murmured the detective. "That's what comes of unbusinesslike methods! The old girl recognised the boy, and they've made off."

"Well," he said, returning to the room, "they've gone, I guess, but we'll look through the place below to make sure. They have such a small start that, with

two motors and a bicycle (I see one standing by the fence), we ought to get them before they go far. Buck up, sir! We're only beginning. Let's get a glance at these clothes presses first."

With practised hand he flung open the big doors. "Nothing there. Wait, let's look in the chest." He lifted the lid and peered in. "Only the usual litter," he said; "the kind of thing one keeps for seven years to see if it will come in handy. I think we are wasting time here. Come along, sir."

But Mark did not come along. He was sitting very stiffly upon the chair into which the detective had thrust him, staring, as a hypnotised man might stare, at something upon the floor, over by the closed chest.

"What is it?" asked the detective, startled.

Then, as Mark did not answer or unfix his dreadful gaze, the other, with a thrill of communicated horror, followed the direction of the staring eyes—slowly—over the board floor, to a spot near the wardrobe where something, slowly trickling from a warped seam of the chest, had formed in a tiny pool of red. The detective needed no second look.

His shrill whistle rang out, loud and menacing in the quiet room—a rush of footsteps sounded from below. Then he laid Mark, who had fainted, upon the bed.

In after years Mark never forgot the slow torture of his recovery from that swoon. The sight of a gable window was always enough to bring it back in its full horror. He shuddered at the sight of a wardrobe, he could never sit comfortably in a room with sloping ceilings; yet his first really conscious look fell upon Mr. Torrance's face, alight with tender anxiety—and something else. The first words he heard were—

"She is safe!"

Just who was safe Mark's clouded brain did not realise for the moment, but the monstrous horror which had enveloped him seemed to fall away. Somewhere a clutching dread loosened. He smiled contentedly, and let the bicycle man feed him fiery stimulant with a spoon.

"Most remarkable thing I ever heard of!" said the bicycle man, between spoons.

Mark's eye strayed to the window—a gable window, high up. It all came back: the chest, the red spot on the floor. "Don't go off again," said the sharp voice of the bicycle man. "It is all right, you know; really it is. Have another brandy!"

"Better tell him at once," said Johnson's familiar voice.

"She is safe, Mark!" This time the words had definite meaning—a meaning to which the look upon Mr. Torrance's face gave point and force. Mark saw him raise his hand unaffectedly to eyes which were wet with tears of thankfulness. He lay quietly, trying to realise.

"But," he said in a whisper. "I saw blood!"

"Yes, I know! It is only a trifle, thank God! A knife thrust in the arm. She is quite safe—my little daughter—quite safe."

Mark drank the remainder of the bicycle man's brandy in a gulp and sat up, but seeing the chest he fell to shuddering. "Let's get out of this horrible room!" he said. "I can't realise it here."

The big detective offered his help with alacrity, and Mark found himself glad enough to lean upon his arm. Mr. Johnson, it is needless to say, was quite himself again. Success (after a few trifling set-backs) had restored him to all his usual complacency.

"I'm afraid you weren't just cut out for a detective, Mr. Mark," he told him with kindly banter. "You faint just a little bit too easy. It doesn't do in the detective business. Why, first thing, when you see something that shows you we've hit on the scent at last, what do you do? Keel over!"

"I thought——"

"Yes; but you shouldn't have thought. Find out first, think after! As a matter of fact it was that knife thrust that saved her. If it had not been for that blood we might have gone away, chasing the fugitives, and left her in that devilish chest! As it was, we got her out of it none too soon."

"Don't talk about it, Johnson," entreated Mr. Torrance. "I only want to remember that she is safe."

"Where is she?" asked Mark, when he could trust himself to ask the simple question.

"She is in one of the rooms downstairs. The doctor is with her. He says she must have absolute quiet. I broke down, and he sent me away. You shall see her soon."

The two men clasped hands in an ecstasy of gratitude. Drawing himself up Mark inhaled the first free breath he had known since the search began.

"We have sent for her sisters," said Mr. Torrance. "They will know by now that she is safe."

"Have the ladies come yet?" asked the doctor, putting an anxious face in at the door. "If not, it is quite necessary that someone who knows the patient well should see her at once. It must be someone in whom she will feel implicit confidence. She has awakened in what seems to be an agony of terror. I cannot reassure her. It is imperative that she should be quieted. Which of you gentlemen would be most likely——"

He paused, and glanced at them inquiringly.

The three men who loved her looked at one another. Then the glances of two of them fell upon Mark. But Mark was seized with sudden fear.

"I dare not," he said. "How do I know? She may not——"

"I think she will, son," said Mr. Torrance, and Tommy gravely added: "I think she will."

"Come quickly, then," said the doctor, somewhat mystified.

Mark followed him down the corridor into a quiet room where the sun of early afternoon lay warm upon a shivering girl, crouched among the pillows, a girl with honey-coloured hair, and a dead white face, a girl with staring, terrified eyes which widened when they saw him, and flamed suddenly into happiness.

"Christine!"

"Oh, Mark! You have come!"

The doctor, no longer mystified, left them together.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE LAST OF BROOK STREET

ONE sometimes wonders if what we call environment is really the solid thing we take it for, or if there is something else nearer, more subtle, an invisible environment which we carry with us, and from which all else takes shape and colour. If not, how shall one account for the change which took place in Brook Street? And how did it happen that, for one at least, the House of Windows fulfilled its true destiny and became a castle in Spain? One can only state the fact that while, for Mrs. Halloren, Brook Street was still Brook Street, for Mark and Christine it transformed itself into a little by-way out of Paradise.

It was wonderful how the fine weather held that autumn, and how, after the cold, clear nights, the sun rose gloriously persistent.

"Another motor trip to-day?" asked Celia smiling. "I think you and Mark almost live in a motor, Christine. See, dear, let me pin on your hat. You know you must be careful of that arm for a long time yet."

Christine relinquished the hat-pin with a laugh.

"Mind you don't get it too far back!" she cautioned. "Just the tip of the nose should show, you know. Mark says he is beginning to take the rest of me for granted. It suits me, though, don't you think?"

Celia kissed the blooming face under the tip-tilted

hat. "It is perfect," she said fondly. "You do look sweet in a motor veil, Christine! I used to think that motor veils were such ugly things."

"That was before we went motoring ourselves," said Christine sagely. "It is wonderful how one's point of view can change." She slipped into her long, loose coat with the air of a comfortable kitten. Then, under cover of fixing a stray lock of Celia's hair, she stole a long look into her sister's face.

"Celia," she said. "Are you quite sure that you do not want me to stay in to-day. The last day in the old rooms? One's point of view does not change much in regard to them, does it? After all, it will seem like leaving—home! Oh, Celia, do you think we shall ever be quite as happy anywhere else?"

"You little sentimentalist! As if you are not happier at this moment than you have ever been in your life!"

"Oh, yes, of course; but that is—Mark!"

"Well, if it is Mark, it will not matter much where you live, will it, since Mark is movable? Personally, I have no doubt that you will manage to be quite as comfortable in Amberley Avenue as you have ever been in Brook Street."

Christine blushed, dimpled, and gave her an extra kiss.

"Yes; I know. Isn't it lovely? It is like a dream. And then, there is Mr. Tor—father (she said the new name very prettily). Do you know, Celia, there are times when I quite forget about him not seeming to be my father. He feels so natural. I shouldn't wonder if sometime I get quite used to him. Do you think so?"

"I shouldn't wonder. There is Mark's horn! Run, dearest!"

The girl hid her face in Celia's shoulder with a little

shudder of nervous terror. It was one of the legacies of that last day in the gable room that she could not hear a motor horn without shrinking.

"Why don't you tell Mark that you do not like to hear the horn, Christine?"

"That would be cowardly. I must get over it. I don't deserve the future if I can't conquer the past."

When she had gone, Celia turned slowly and went over to the window where Ada sat in her favourite chair. The two girls said nothing, but sat with clasped hands for a long time.

"Our little girl is happy at last," said Ada dreamily.

"Yes."

"But I can't feel that you are happy, Celia."

"I think I am, dear. What you mean is that I am no longer young."

"You should be young. You will be young when you are happier."

"I am happy."

"But you are fretting about leaving these rooms. I know you are."

The other girl made no reply.

"And yet it has been long years of hard work—slavery—for you."

"It has been my life. You may be right in saying that I feel the wrench of leaving. I can't explain it. My life is buried here, perhaps that is why. Christine and you, perhaps, may go out to other lives, and I shall have my full share of your happiness. Don't imagine that I am going to be a sour old maid. But my life—so much of it—is buried here. I can't explain it."

"One feels so much that one can't explain," said Ada. "The dear old rooms!" Quick tears rushed to her eyes. "Do you remember how the girls from the

Stores used to come and sit when Christine was a baby, and how they used to beg to be allowed to bathe her? And the garden! No other garden will ever be quite the same. This garden always seemed to belong just to me. No one else seemed to care for it—except Tommy. Do you know what I was just thinking? That never once have I walked in it all these years! At first I thought I would coax the key from Mrs. Halloren, but then I thought I would leave it as it has always been: a kind of dream garden, not like any other garden that ever was!”

“I think you are wise, dear. Is Mr. Torrance coming to-day?”

Ada blushed faintly. “I—I don’t know. I think so.”

The girls sank into silence again, each so busy with her own thoughts that both started a little at the sound of a knock upon the door, but it was only Mr. Torrance with some roses for Ada.

“All alone?” he asked, laying the fragrant blossoms in her lap.

“Alone? No. Celia is here; at least, she was here a moment ago.”

“Then she must have slipped out. May we not slip out, too? I passed Mark and Christine. The air is so bracing, I know it will do you good.”

“It is our last day here.”

“I know; that is why you should go out.”

“If Celia will go, too.”

But Celia, appearing just then from the inner room, was adamant. She had so many little things to do, she said, that she would be busy all afternoon. Ada, however, ought really to get some fresh air. She had had a headache and the drive would do her good. Besides,

it would be so pleasant if Ada would bring Mr. Torrance back for tea; Christine was sure to bring Mark, and Tommy was quite likely to drop in, and they could all have tea together. So Ada's hat was pinned on, and Ada's motor veil tied securely, and Celia stood at the door and heard her laugh float up—still the clear laugh of a girl, and happy with that wonderful happiness which comes to us all but once.

They passed Tommy upon the landing. Celia could hear the laughing greeting, Ada's soft voice, and Mr. Torrance's deeper one. And then Tommy's step came up the stair—it seemed to Celia's imagination—more slowly and heavily than she had ever heard it mount before.

She waited for him at the door, to catch the look upon his face before he had had time to cover it with a smile. But Tommy looked as usual. Indeed he appeared rather festive. They went back into the room together.

"I met Ada upon the stairs," said Tommy conversationally.

"Yes. She has gone out," said Celia. "Mr. Torrance thought the fresh air might do her good."

"It will; and she is looking so well. I have never seen Ada look like she looks now."

"Neither have I," said Celia.

"Do you think it's the relief from money difficulties—the freedom from anxiety?"

"No," said Celia bluntly, "I don't."

"Well, perhaps not. Anyway," with a somewhat obvious effort, "I am glad that she has gone out. I wanted to see you alone, Celia. I want to speak to you. You know that I have often wanted to speak, but you would never quite let me. But now you must listen to me. I want to ask you to marry me, Celia. Every-

thing is changing here. You are leaving this home; won't you make a home for me?"

When Celia turned her eyes to him, they were very soft and wet.

"Thank you, dear," she said, "but I—I can't."

"Can't you tell me why, Celia?"

"No; I don't believe that I can. I would rather you did not question me about it, Tommy. One does not argue about things like that. One merely feels."

"That's just it," said Tommy eagerly. "One does feel; it is all feeling, and when one tries to make words of it, it doesn't sound right." He hesitated miserably. "I know that if I could talk to you as I would like, you would listen."

Celia shook her head. "I am not a woman who cares for pretty phrases."

"Yes, you are. All women like them. All the same"—with a flash of insight—"it is partly your own fault, Celia. You try not to let me say things; you know you do!"

Celia looked at him keenly. Was he pretending, or did he really consider her so hopelessly dense? An erratic impulse of sheer frankness seized her.

"Tommy," she said, "I have known for years that you love my sister Ada."

At least he had not been pretending! The shock was patent. He sat there, staring at her, white-faced, the pain of a wounded child in his round blue eyes.

"So now you know," finished Celia relentlessly. Now that she had spoken there were other things to say. Things that clamoured for utterance. The vengeance of hurt pride, of jealousy, of pain long and bravely hidden; the sum of years. But somehow that look of the hurt child in him stopped her. Instead, she added almost

gently, "You can see, can't you, that you have no right to ask me to marry you?"

"Is that what has been the matter all the time?" asked Tommy, very low.

"Yes."

"You think I do not—love you?"

"I know it."

The pain in Tommy's eyes seemed to harden into something bright and cold. His whole appearance seemed indefinitely to change. He left his chair and came close to her, seizing her wrist.

"Celia Brown," he said, "if you had only been truthful once—just once—we might have been happy all these years!"

Celia shook herself free.

"You can't deny that you love her!"

"I don't deny it. I do love her. My love for her is—I don't know what it is. I can't put it in words. But I am telling you the simple truth when I say that I can love her just as well when she is Mrs. Torrance as I do now when she is Ada Brown. God bless her! She has always been like a saint to me. I think she is part of my religion. One does not expect human love from the object of one's devotions. I doubt"—with a little doleful smile—"if one would know what to do with it!"

"I won't take second best," said Celia grimly.

"You would rather have what I have given Ada than what I have given you?"

"I don't know what you have given me."

Before she could stop him, he had her in his arms. "This!" he said, "and this, and this!"

Then he let her go, and sat down quietly in his former place.

Celia sank into Ada's chair by the window. She

was trembling. There was a horrible suffocating pain in her throat. Her lips where he had kissed them were bruised and burning. She felt insulted, angry, unbearably surprised and shaken; and yet, what was the other feeling? A young feeling—a feeling which sent the blood to her cheeks and a light to her eyes? She kept her face turned away.

"I suppose," said Tommy presently, in a subdued voice, "I suppose I have lost any chance that I ever had now. But you drove me to it, Celia. It made me wild to think that you could have misunderstood so badly all these years. I loved you from the first day I saw you in Angers' Stores. I followed you home. I got to know you. There has never been anyone but you—in that way. Ada is different—so beautiful, so far away! Haven't you felt like that about her yourself? But one does not refuse to be happy on earth because one has looked at a star."

Celia sat up suddenly.

"They will all be in to tea presently," she remarked. Without looking at him, and with her face still turned away, she filled a kettle with water and set it over the gas. Tommy watched her with a growing sense of injury. One never knew of what Celia was thinking. Was she thinking at all? Did she care at all? Was she really as heartless as she seemed? If he could only understand her! Vaguely he knew that understanding now would mean everything, and yet he was so powerless to understand! A kind of rage possessed him—that a man might be so near to happiness and miss it. The barrier between them was so real, yet so invisible. It was not something which a man might find and tear down with his hands. How careful she was not to look at him! With what precision and daintiness she

placed the china upon the table. Tommy had seen her place it so, hundreds of times. A wave of deep regret swept over him that he saw it now for the last time. The old life was ending. Christine and Ada were going to homes of their own. The thought brought blank loneliness.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed involuntarily; "this is the last day!"

Celia nodded. "Had you forgotten?"

"Yes, for the moment."

Silence fell again while Celia measured the tea.

"Celia," said Tommy sternly, "now for the last time I ask you to marry me!"

"Tommy, for the last time, I refuse."

"You do not love me?"

Celia placed the butter upon the table with a little thump.

"I think," said Tommy patiently, "that when a man asks a woman to marry him, he has a right to know whether she loves him or not."

Celia placed the raspberry jam beside the butter.

"I think," she said, "that when a woman refuses to marry a man, he has no rights whatever."

"That is unfair. Why not be frank? It is just as easy for you to tell me that you do not love me as to keep silent."

"It would be, if it were true. No, Tommy! Please stay where you are. If you want frankness, I'll give it to you. I think I do love you. I think I loved you long ago. Not just at first, but when I knew you better. But all my love has been spoiled and embittered. I saw your love for Ada. I knew it was a kind of worship, but I thought it was more than that—or less, whichever you like. I did not see how you could love me, too.

And I do not see it now. I do not want a divided love. I am jealous—not of Ada, but of love. And if I will not marry you now, it is not because I do not long for love, but because I long for it so terribly that I can't risk not having—all."

She left the table and came across the room to where he sat. It was growing dusk, but he could see her plainly, could see the flush on her cheek and the light in her eyes.

"Do you understand—now?" she said.

A great wave of illumination swept over Tommy. Miraculously he did understand. The problem of Celia, which he had feared might baffle him for ever, seemed suddenly all made plain. It was not that she had given little, but that she could give so much.

And to give it she required a like surrender. No divided allegiance would do; all the years of his waiting were as nothing to her; her own lost youth was nothing. She stood there before him, a woman with all her best to give, demanding the utmost as her due. And as he saw all this, a new feeling stirred in him—a resolve, an unutterable longing! A longing which deepened into hope—into certainty. He stood up and looked into her eyes.

"Dear!" he said; and then, "I shall win you yet."

But this time he lifted only her hand to his lips, and kissed the fingers gently.

Celia went swiftly into the next room. When she came back she looked as usual.

"And so, just to change the subject," she said, "what are they going to do to the man Wilson now that they have caught him?"

"Penal servitude, I suppose," he answered cheerfully.

"And the old woman?"

"Asylum. She's as mad as a March hare. Since that afternoon when Johnson and Cunningham found her sitting in the ditch by the wood, she has not had a lucid interval, never will have now. She is harmless. Goes about asking everyone if they have seen her daughter Agnes. Mr. Torrance will see that she has the best of care for the rest of her life. The doctors think that she was already irresponsible sixteen years ago when she stole Christine."

"Poor creature! One can't hate a mad woman. When one has suffered so that reason rebels, it is time for the rest of us to be merciful."

"You feel like that now when Christine is safe and happy, but you didn't feel quite that way a month ago."

"No; I did not. That is just a little way life has. Tommy, please don't sit there and stare. It is time to cut the bread."

She smiled at him so gaily that Tommy forgot how serious he was and smiled too.

"You make such nice thin slices, you know," said Celia, handing him the knife.

Tommy smiled again, with the modesty of conscious worth.

"You have not read me your latest poem, either," she added. "Perhaps we shall have time for it before the others come back."

Tommy laid down the bread knife.

"It might be better," he agreed. "Mark has absolutely no appreciation of poetry, and sometimes I doubt if Mr. Torrance really enjoys it. Of course, I know that I am not a great poet. But I really rather like this last. It was Ada's garden that gave me the idea. May

I read it now? We can cut the bread after they come.
Here it is:—

“I gazed into a garden once, between the iron bars;
The roses all were red and tall,
The lilies pale, like stars!
Trembling I passed the garden gate—to find, ah me,
ah me!
The glamour fled, the flowers dead,
What time I turned the key.’”

Celia took so long to comment upon this, that Tommy observed her anxiously.

“You don’t like it?” he asked.

“Oh, yes! I like it—as poetry. I was just wondering if it were true.”

The poet’s face cleared. “If it’s good poetry, it doesn’t matter whether it’s true or not,” he said cheerfully.

Celia laughed, and pointed to the uncut bread.

The clear toot-toot of a motor-horn, followed quickly by a honk-honk of deeper tone, caused the poet to drop his verses and seize the bread knife.

“Here they come!” said Celia. And as she heard their laughter upon the stair, a tender light came into her blue eyes. But she said no appropriate or touching word; she looked as much like a sphinx as ever, as she poured the water upon the tea, and opened the door so that no one might trip upon the third step from the top.

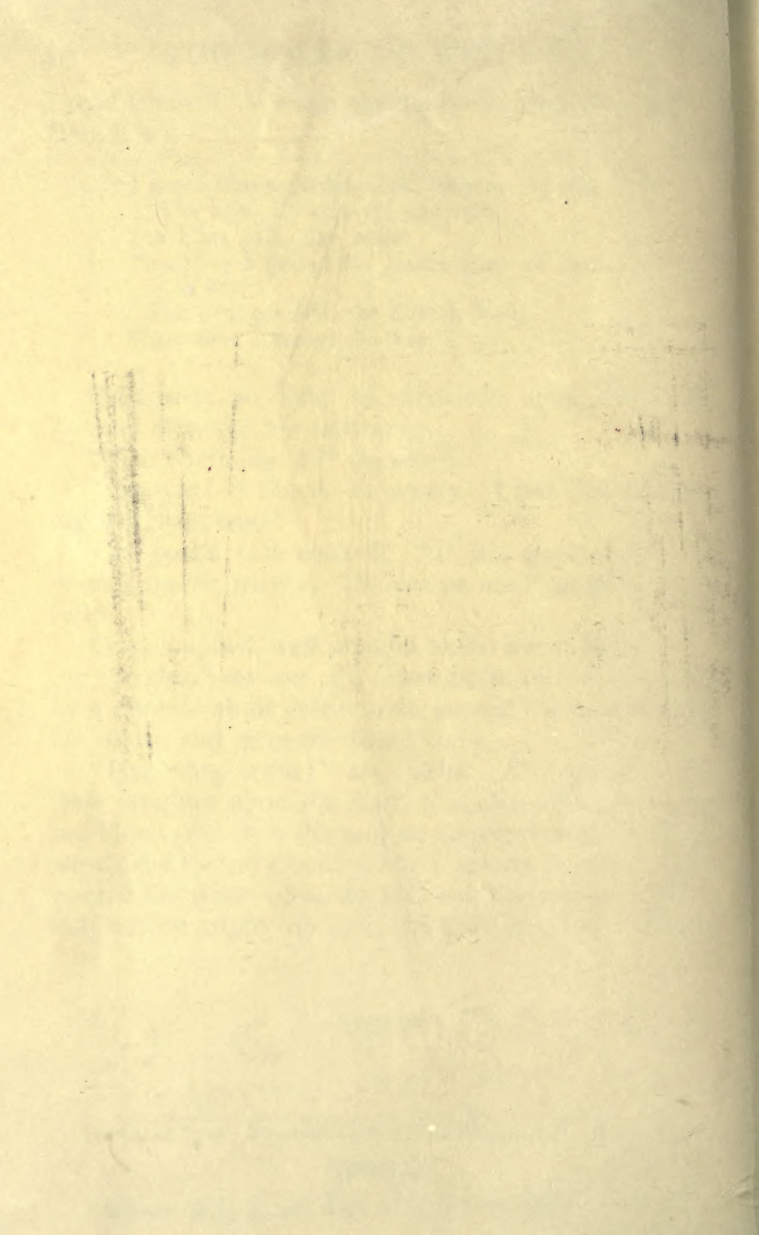
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